

"I LIVE FOR THE CHEMISTRY IN THIS BOOK!"

- Swati Hedge, Writer and Editor.

# Facing Us

**BOOK 1:**

KIDS OF THE DISTRICT SERIES



NICCI HARRIS

# FACING US

*Kids of The District Series #1*

By

Nicci Harris

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# Prologue

1979

*Controllare le strade; control della citta*

*(Control the streets; control the city.)*

My father was a *Ladder-Man* in the late 1940s. In the old country; Sicily. He was the boy *The Family* trusted with their money, for he was the one with the clearest vantage point. The expression *Ladder-Man* came about back in the early gambling days when young men would stand on ladders on the casino gaming floors, watching and waiting for misconduct. My father was the most trusted and feared man in Sicily, a complete oxymoron I know; it all depended on who was doing the trusting, and who was doing the fearing. *The Family* payed him 90 Lira an hour, which was good money back then and so of course crooks of the club found death quickly, the ones on the gaming floor pocketing chips, counting cards and winning too much of *The Family's* money. There was very little chance for rebuttal once my father had them in his sight. He was an adolescent then and rather engrossed in the power bestowed upon him, as would any young man with the strength of many at his beck and call. Things were irrevocably simpler, if there was a misdemeanour, it was handled quickly, quietly and strictly; very few people lived to talk about it. Which is as it should be.

According to gossip my grandfather was a 'likable type,' and had no knowledge of his son's activities. Luckily for us, my grandfather died when my father was sixteen, leaving him without any relations. *Luckily?* Yes, because there is little I can learn from a 'likable type' of man. After three years of being the boy up the ladder on the most notorious gaming floors in

Sicily my father became an orphan, and an orphan he was for exactly two-days before *The Family* picked their boy up and made him officially their own. They bought my father. They own him now. It wasn't until this time that he really understood what he had signed up for.

He had married the mob.

When you marry the mob, as when you marry a woman, you are contractually, spiritually, legally and emotionally bound to them. The key difference being there is no such thing as divorcees, only widowers. That is where it all started, humble beginnings and a life of servitude to *The Family*.

When I was a young man my ego was larger than Achilles', rivalling my father's in every way. It would be fair to say I flexed my muscles any chance I could, at the boys at school, at the people on the sidewalk offering me less than obedient glances ... at everyone. I was a *sfacciato* little shit and partly because of that cheekiness I thrived on the sensation people's submission gave me. I'd usually be hard as rock beneath my trousers in the midst of a power play. I am Jimmy Storm, son of Paul Storm, and my name is legendary. Storm is not our real name. My father named himself when he became a made-man. Half of Sicily owed *The Family* money, which meant we owned half of Sicily and her people. We managed people with ease, for their lives were worthless to us and priceless to them. I grew up around the cruellest, slyest, dirtiest bastards in the country and they set the bench-mark for my behaviour as an adolescent; they were my idols.

When I turned twenty-seven, My Zu (uncle) Norris and I left Sicily and took with us blessings and funds from *The Family* with our sights set on a new place of profit. We flew to an area of Australia renowned for its wealthy residents, a secluded section on the coast consisting of four towns, Brussman, Connolly, Stormy River and Moorup. I recently learnt an Australian idiom for this kind of unmonitored and isolated area, 'Bandit Country.'

I was out to prove myself at any cost.

"I am *Jimmy Storm*!" I state, glaring down at the *bambino* on whose jugular I have my shoes. The rubber of my heel presses very slowly on his windpipe and when he tries to buck away, I know I have found the *dolce* (sweet) spot. He tries desperately to claw at my foot, attempting to relieve some pressure or shift my command. He can't, but that doesn't save my shoes from fingerprints, and *that* is just so inconvenient.

My Zu and I have been in this miserable part of the world for three god forsaken weeks and have found nothing short of disorganised, disrespectful and inferior versions of ourselves. The young man whose trachea I'm currently crushing, is Dustin Nerrock, and he is '*the name*' about these parts. A slightly hostile *discussione* took place and I am simply establishing my dominance. We met under casual terms and this disrespectful man forgot his manners along the way. I've been told 'what the Australian male lacks in brains, he makes up for in brawn'; I truly hope so. Since being here we have found a lack of connections, a lack of muscle due to scope (Sicily is smaller than this area), and far too many new legalities to ... manipulate, without consultants to advise us. Despite my indelicate means of conversing, the end game is to get Dustin Nerrock, and a few other big-name families in this area to work with us.

*For us...*

His father died last year, leaving Dustin with businesses scattered throughout the area and no idea how to utilise them. Money and dominance are the game and the man under my shoe has more money than sense, an ego that rivals my own and a name people know. And soon, people will know mine.

"Do you have any idea who-" Dustin chokes, struggling to force words out while my boot is pressed to his throat.

*Pity...*

"*Oh scusari*," I say, feigning concern. "Did you say something?" His face looks so feeble; I want to crush it 'til it goes away. Men who bow are ants, small and helpless, but infinitely useful when put to work. I've been told my temper is an issue. Apparently, it is obvious when I'm irate; I speak a mongrel version of Italian, Sicilian and English and my accent seems to thicken... *Personally, I don't hear it...* "*Madonna Mia* are you going to cry like a *bambino*, Dustin. You're the man about these parts. Stand up!" I yell, and then press my heel further into his jugular... so he can't. "*Alzarsi!* Stand up!" He can't. I won't let him, and the whole idea of that makes my dick twitch.

I find myself tiring of his weak attempts to fight me off and remove my shoe from his neck, allowing him to gasp and drag some much-needed air into his lungs. And he does, sucking like a man possessed. His palms meet the pavement under the dimly lit street lights and I take a few steps back to allow him room to stand. He pushes off his hands and climbs to his feet, a

scowl firmly set on his face. Dustin all but growls at me and then spits blood to his side, his body shuddering slightly while regaining air and stability.

I mock. "Are you okay, *bambino*?"

"You're in deep shit," he hisses, coughing at the pavement.

The bitterness in the air is tangible, an entity apart. It is time to switch the play and lead the conversation in a more mutually beneficial direction. I humiliated him, and now I shall woo him. "Let's talk like gentlemen, Dustin," I begin, removing a handkerchief from my pocket and offering it to him as he coughs and clears his throat. "Please, oblige me?" I wave the folded white material in front of him, a feigned gesture of truce.

He takes it and uses it to wipe away the little pieces of gravel etched to his cheek. "Talk..."

"Perhaps we can start again. *Si*?" This is my favourite part of conversing, switching the play, manipulating the conversation. "You know who I am now, and I know who you are. You also know what I do, *si*?"

He stares at me, brows drawn together, and eyes narrowed. "Yes."

"Well," I say, clapping my hands and grinning widely at him. "That's an excellent start. May I recommend we take this little discussion to a more appropriate place. I know an establishment not too far from here... will you join me for a drink? Put this *little* and unfortunate indiscretion behind us..."

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It didn't take long for me to gain Dustin Nerrock's favour, in fact it took less time than I imagined. The man is hungry, power hungry. I recognise it in him. It is indeed a trait we share. After three hours with Dustin, I'm even more convinced that this area holds infinite possibilities. To start with, there is a high crime rate, which, of course, is of huge benefit to my cause as protection comes at a cost. There are strictly governed gun laws, which, of course, means demand, and I am happy to supply. There is a vast class division which means two things: an opportunity to clean up the riffraff at a cost, and addicts (I love addicts). My father told me to never choose a side, find out their motivation(s) and make them beholden to you. 'Control the streets; control the city.' I shared this philosophy with Dustin. The final and most tantalising piece of information was, this country is bursting at the



seams with minerals, and is far too big to secure thoroughly: gold, diamonds, and unsealed access roads.

"I have never met a rich man I didn't like," I declare, clinking Dustin's glass with mine.

A grin stretches across his face. The grin of a man whose eyes are suffused in dollar signs. "Well that said, there are other's we need in on this..."

"Yes." I raise the glass to my lips and the smoky whiskey fumes float deliciously up my nostrils. "A man who my *Capo* told me about. *Big* pull in the old country." I use my hands to talk. My Italian mannerisms are hard-wired. "*Big* pull. But he seems quite the enigma. I could not track him down. He has recently married some beauty queen from England and is probably just... how do you Australians say it? *Fucking* and *fucking*. No time for business when there is pussy. *Si?*" We both laugh, and I play the game of equals; that is what I want him to believe. "So, this man." I continue. "He is a half-Sicilian, half-Australian, mongrel. *But, The Family...* They seem to love him."

Dustin's gaze narrows, his amused expression slipping. "I know who you're talking about... We can't trust that bastard." And I'm immediately intrigued...

"He is very important to my family." I feign a sigh but I'm eager to meet the man who has inspired such a reaction. I have never liked 'likable people,' it is the unlikable ones I prefer. They have attitude and spirit. They make excellent soldiers.

Dustin seems to study my expression. "He will never agree."

"He will. I assure you-" My attention is redirected to a clearly inebriated character as he swipes a collection of glasses from the bar, the sound of them smashing rudely invades my senses. I tilt my head and watch from our booth as he begins to yell and threaten the bartender.

*Well, this is a pity.*

I was having such a peaceful drink, and I have my favourite shirt on. The inebriated man's grasp of the English language shocks me, and it makes me wonder whether it was his mother or father that failed him so profoundly; perhaps both.

"Listen, 'ere," he starts, pointing a shaky finger at the bartender. "I ain't sellin' nufin. I'm just 'ere for a drink."

*Interesting...*

I shuffle from my seat and excuse myself politely, then walk slowly over to the man at the bar, lean beside him and smile.

“Wah you want?” He lowers his voice, “I ain’t sell nufin’.” His mouth opens and expels words only vaguely determinable. It is a damn pity about this shirt.

“*Scusa*,” I motion across to my table, “I was drinking over there with a very important colleague of mine and you’re making it rather hard to concentrate. May I suggest finding a different establishment, *si*?”

It has been a long time since a man dare strike me and it is apparent why over the course of the next few seconds. He stumbles backwards and then jolts forward, throwing his fist into my face. The smell of his breath knocks me harder than his knuckles do. My cheek burns for a short moment. I retaliate. I shrug apologetically to the wide-eyed bartender and jab the bastard beside me twice in the throat. *Jab. Jab.* His knees meet the floor with a thud. My knee rises to contact his chin. *Crack.* A guttural groan curdles up his jugular. My knee rises again. Another groan. The back of my hand collides with his cheek. How *irrispettoso*. I can’t stand disrespect in any form. As I stare down at his swaying body, I notice a small stain on my shirt.

“*Madonna Mia. Fare le corna a qualcuno*,” I hiss to him. “Look what you did.”

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Dustin’s brawn most definitely comes in handy as we relocate my new friend to a more private locale; an old building Dustin inherited. He doesn’t look quite as lively laying bound on the cold concrete floor. Although, my dick does like the bindings. I can already tell that after this exchange I’ll be in dire need of a lady’s company.

“Will you drag Mr...?” I stare questioningly at our bound captive.

“Get fucked . . .” he chokes on his own words.

“Very well, will you drag Mr Get Fucked so he is sitting against that wall, just there, *si*?” I smile calmly in my new partner’s direction, pointing at the rear brick wall. “Thank you, Dustin.”

This disused warehouse would make an excellent abattoir, perhaps I will recommend a new business endeavour to Dustin. I ponder this as I remove a

few items from my bag and set them down on the wooden work bench behind me: a blade, a bottle of aqua, and a Luna Stick. Pouring a small amount of water onto my shirt, I gently wipe at the stain, the chill from the liquid sending shivers down my spine.

“Such a pity,” I mutter to myself. When I tilt my head to watch Dustin manoeuvrer our intoxicated captive to a more suitable position, I feel serenity wash over me. These are the moments where I truly shine. In the grit. When others usually waver, I am at my most contained. Perhaps, it also has to do with my new partner’s eager and obedient behaviour; after all, I did nearly squash his throat into the pavement a mere few hours ago. A sly grin draws my lips out. Who said money can’t buy happiness? Money can purchase the loyalest of comrades, and fear has no limit—empires have been built on the foundations of both.

“I am Jimmy Storm. You know me?” I query, though I know the answer.

“No,” our barely coherent friend snaps, pulling away from Dustin’s grip.

“Well, this is Dustin Nerrock. You know him?” I ask, once again knowing the response. Our inebriated friend glances up at Dustin and nods, appearing to exhibit a suitable level of unease. “Well, now you know me, too. Jimmy. Storm. I would like to know who you work for?”

“I’m not fucki—”

“A-ta-ta-ta,” I wave my finger at his rude interruption. “Before you say no, we found ten grams of heroin on you. Now, don’t lie to Jimmy. Tell me who in this town supplies you... And then I will give you an offer you can’t refuse.”

“I’m neva snitchin’. He’d fuckin’ kill me.”

“I see” -I sigh and turn to my assortment of items- “I respect that.” As I pick up the switch knife and feel the cold metal in my palm, I run my finger over the blade, the rigid edge grating my pad. The excitement of the following five-minutes forces blood directly to my groin and I find myself in a state of impatience, eager to show Dustin how I assure success. I spin on my heels and walk directly to my captive, lean down, and within seconds the deed is done. The blade slices through his flesh like a zipper parting fabric. It ruptures the nerves within. His eyes widen, and his hand grips his left wrist. Blood trickles through his fingers and drips onto the concrete.

“Shit,” he cries. “wha tha fuck? You said you respected tha.”

"I do, very much," I state, adamantly. "I hope you live. Loyalty is my favourite virtue."

"*Christ*," Dustin mutters from behind me. Yes, this is how we interrogate in *my* family. You always need a clock.

"You will die from exsanguination within ten minutes." I squat to the man's side and grin, watching his face pale and his head bobble on his neck as nausea floods him. I have seen that look many times. "I am a spiritual man. You would not know. I am a Catholic. And I could swear to Mother *Maria*..." I stare at him as he struggles to hold his head up, narrowing my eyes to better study his. "I could swear you can see death take a man. The seconds just before... in his eyes... you see death enter him."

Something akin to a whimper splutters from his throat and panicked tears burst from the corners of his shallow eyes. This poor underprivileged street rat will not be missed, and without any evidence, his disappearance will be stamped drug-related. Which, in a way, it is. "Now, tell me where I can find your boss and I will help you live."

"What? How?" Dustin asks me.

I laugh from deep within my abdomen, I just can't help it. "I told you, I'm a spiritual man."

My weeping captive tries to speak, "he is... he owns..."

"Can you feel that chill?" I ask him, moving so close my lips brush the shell of his ear. "*He* is near, my friend."

"He owns Le Feir. The bakery." He passes out, seven minutes before closing time. The smell of his blood, metallic and tangy, hits my nose. It pools around his outstretched legs, creating small glistening puddles. Yes, I think to myself, *this warehouse would make an excellent abattoir*.

Deciding to keep my word, I stand and walk briskly over to the work bench, retrieving the Luna Caustic (Nitrate stick); one of my favourite tools. While I roll up my sleeves and wet the stick's tip, I think about what a real shame it is that my captive won't be conscious to feel the burn. I hear it is quite a unique sensation. My dick is throbbing like a stubbed toe below my zipper as I approach my captive and squat to his side. I begin to cauterise his slit wrist, the blood makes it rather difficult, however, not impossible, and I've had plenty of practise. "So young, Dustin," I call over my shoulder, my eyes unwavering as I work, "we will pay Mr Le Feir a visit tomorrow, make a deal. We don't want any product besides ours hitting these streets. This is now, our *quartiere*, our *District*. Why is this?"

“Control the streets, control the city,” he replies, his nerves stammer through his voice. A chuckle escapes me, I think I may have scared my new partner; how quaint. It appears Dustin Nerrock doesn’t get his hands dirty; he must be a proficient delegator. But my father told me, ‘it is the dirt that makes the man appreciate the sparkle.’

“More importantly than Mr Fier,” I say. “Is to organise a meet with the man my *Capo* spoke about... You know him, where will we find him?”

I hear Dustin release an exaggerated breath. “Luca Butcher, lives in Connolly.”

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# ONE: Blesk

Cradled in the warmth of my bed, surrounded by the smell of daisies, peaches, and home, I'm almost content. *Almost*. The bed dips, and I recognise it even from somewhere between slumber and wake, rolling to accommodate his presence. My body curls to the side and I hug my *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* pillow, slowly drifting back to incoherence. Slipping, breathing heavier, relaxing into an exhale, until I feel movement between my legs, and his breath spilling down on me hard, fast, and hot. Usually, I wake up with him on top of me, but today he's manoeuvring to push inside me from behind, while my fingers claw at the comforter.

*Comforter, what an ironic name.*

A moan escapes me, and I attempt to recoil, squeezing my thighs together, squeezing my eyes together, but it's an attempt to no avail.

"Thank you," he groans into my ear, adding more pressure; pressure as he pries my thighs apart with his hands, pressure on my spine as he envelops my small frame, and pressure from his sharp thrusts inside me.

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A sudden bump brings me back to consciousness, and lights and horns inundate me... I must have drifted off. I swallow down memories of the past and focus on my future. A brighter one. For most of the morning, I've sat in the back of a taxi, resisting the urge to jump out. Leaving The District after two decades is going to be a huge change. So much has happened there. In many ways, I should be glad. It's an area apart from the rest of the country, with both a beating heart and sharp claws. As I watch the landscape change from urban to rural, I'm reminded of how isolated it is.

Since my brother left three years ago to get his Bachelor's in Commerce many miles from The District, I've basically been an only child. I haven't seen him for months and haven't lived within walking distance of him for years. My brother is four years my senior, and we are like chalk and cheese, but, nevertheless, for most of my childhood we were inseparable. My father says that from the moment I came into my brother's life he was undeniably smitten, extremely overprotective, and accepting of all responsibility for his new little sister immediately. But I've changed so much since he's been gone. I love him dearly, and yet, when he left, I felt like I could breathe for the first time.

After I pay the fare and then wander to the campus reception to drop off my luggage, I make my way to the library. It is an impressive piece of architecture. It's ten stories high, and from the bottom floor I can peer up to the very top. The stacks spiral to its peak, and it takes my breath away. It smells like leather and dust—I absolutely love it. I've spent an enormous amount of time in libraries, favouring the company of the characters in print to those in the real world. I have travelled with Huck and Tom, fought in wars, learnt from Atticus Finch and fallen in love with the likes of Angel Clare and Romeo Montague.

My dad texts me just as I slump down onto one of the many multicoloured bean bags that are scattered across the first floor.

**Dad:** You only have six of your nine lives left, Kitten. Remember that and let Erik take care of you. Don't be stubborn. He wants to be there for you, so just let him.

I am now my little family's only surviving female member. My mother died a few years ago after a long fight against cancer. She wasn't my mother for my whole life, I'm adopted, however, no one else ever came close to fitting the bill. She had long, wavy brown hair, big brown eyes, and resembled an Arabian princess to me. I miss her every day and am reminded of her whenever I see the peach trees we planted in the meadow behind our house. We planted the trees after a research paper we found suggested that peaches are beneficial in fighting the cancer cells and can even help with hair loss. Peaches are my favourite fruit, not only because I like the smell, and taste, but because of the memories they hold.

"How'd I know I'd find you here?" I hear my brother Erik call out from a distant stack. His voice carries through the library, and much to my embarrassment turns many scowling faces.

I raise my finger, pressing it against my lips. “*Shhhh...*” I whisper as he approaches. “I’m not sure if you’ve ever been in one of these before, but you’re supposed to be quiet.” I force a smile at him as he sits down by my side. We stare at each other for a few moments and I narrow my eyes to take him all in.

Erik has a casual and endearing confidence to him. He’s self-assured and forthright and has always been much more interesting than I am. He’s really tall, or at least it feels that way to me. He fulfils the Australian stereotype to a T, with sandy blonde hair, sun-kissed skin, and the athletic physique of a man who spends his afternoons at the gym.

He grins at me. “How was the drive?”

I slouch with a sigh. “Non-eventful.”

“Miss me?”

“I was miserable,” I mumble. Then I grin at him and add, “So it was just like having you at home.”

“Oh, very funny.” He clears his throat, looking almost disappointed by my joke. “Dad good?”

“Yep, he’s fine,” I say.

*What next? Is he going to ask me about the weather?*

“It’s been fucking hot, hey?”

I snort.

He rolls his eyes. “Trust you to find your way into the lamest part of the university.” Erik takes Jack Kerouac’s *On The Road* from my hand and tosses it onto a random shelf. I make a mental note to return it to its rightful place. An awkward silence hangs between us. It’s been so long since I’ve seen him.

Desperate to say something to end the insufferable quiet, I say, “Have you seen the size of this library?”

“Oh, no, never, Bebe. Not once in the three years I’ve been going here.” He grins at me through parted lips that display his near perfect teeth.

*You know I hate being called that.*

“Sarcasm is the weakest form of humour,” I mention.

“It’s also the most popular.”

“Well it’s amazing in here,” I state very matter-of-factly. “And a brain is wasted on you.”

Erik erupts into laughter, and the air in my chest slowly eases out.

*Thank God.*



“Well I suppose I’m lucky girls don’t like me for my brain. Ain’t that right?”

“Well, maybe they would, if you actually--”

He interjects with a silly snoring sound. “*And* now I’m bored. You’re late for an afternoon of orienting yourself with university life.” As Erik stands, he offers his hand to me to take. “Up.”

“Huh?”

“Your orientation, Blesk.”

“A few more minutes?” I plead.

The university is overwhelming and although my actual reason for being here excites me, the renowned student lifestyle has the opposite effect.

“No one puts Bebe in the corner,” he mocks.

*I loathe that reference.*

“Erik, please don’t say that in front of people,” I beg, frowning up at him.

“Get up, Blesk.” His smile tightens and he waves his arm insistently. I stare at his outstretched hand, willing myself to take it.

*Well, I suppose I can’t hide in here all day.*

I place my palm in his and he helps me to my feet.

Flattening my skirt down my thighs and tossing my blonde hair to one side, I peer at him sheepishly. “Do I look okay?”

He scoffs. “You know you’re pretty.” Then he pauses to look me over. “Everyone with eyes thinks that, Blesk.”

I scoop my satchel up and swing it over my shoulder, then sigh. “Okay. Let’s do this”

“Your hair is getting so long, Goldilocks.” He flicks a rogue strand off my face.

“Don’t call me that,” I grumble, stepping behind him to exit the sliding doors.

He chuckles. “Grumpy.”

“I’m not, sorry.” That dream has me in a funk. I fidget with a few frayed fibres on my shirt’s hem, “I’m just nervous.”

He turns to face me and rubs my shoulders with both big hands. “Don’t be silly. You’ll be fine. I’m like a god in this place.”

*And so modest.*

He spins on his heels and begins to wander towards the outskirts of the orientation festival.

Rolling my eyes, I chase after him, trying to appear as though I belong. "Only in this place? You're slipping."

Erik ignores my comment, and as we pass other students, he either offers them a charming smile of recognition or a flirtatious wink. "I see nothing has changed," I mutter.

"Like I said," he grins at me, "I'm like a god here."

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There are hundreds of students on the oval and the sun is blazing in the cloudless sky, which, to my delight, means I can wear my sunglasses and hide my anxiety behind them. A stage at the front is surrounded by small stalls run by students advertising an assortment of extracurricular activities. The student guild. Sporting groups. Debating.

Socialists scurry around me. It's colourful and noisy. Most of the girls I pass are wearing jeans and sneakers, making me feel even more uneasy in my skirt and wedges. I wished there were uniforms.

*I wish I didn't wish there were uniforms.*

I tighten when Erik puts his hand protectively on the small of my back and steers us through the crowd towards a group of kids who are waving at him. He can be so overbearing and domineering, but I know his sole interest is to keep me safe. I know this. Still, his possessiveness makes my stomach stir.

My breath hitches as we approach the smiling faces eagerly interested in me.

"Hey dickhead!" A young man laughs as he and Erik share a slapped handshake. "Is this Blesk?" He turns his keen eyes to acknowledge me as I step to Erik's side.

Erik chuckles at the greeting. "Yes, this is my little sister, Blesk."

"Hi, B, I'm Jaxon," he says, extending his hand for me to shake. "Heard a lot about you. You don't mind if I call you 'B' do you?"

"Yes, she does," Erik chimes in.

"No, no I don't," I reply, shaking his hand. Shaking hands is *weird*. "I may not answer to it though."

They all laugh.

*Was that funny?*

“So this is the famous younger Bellamy, ay?” Jaxon tucks his hands into his pockets. “You never told me your sister was hot, Erik.”

Erik stiffens. “Jaxon, jeez dude, that’s my little sister! Show some respect! You got it?”

I squirm. Couldn’t he have waited until I wasn’t standing here to say that?

Jaxon is a stocky guy. One of those high protein, CrossFit types. He stands with his biceps protruding at his sides, as if he’s posing for a bodybuilding magazine. With dusty brown hair that is trimmed short, deep grey eyes, and a sharply defined jawline, he’d be attractive if he wasn’t such a jock.

“Now I don’t wanna just to piss you off, but she just got 50% more hot to me,” he smirks with a quick rake of my body with his eyes.

*Wow, I’m standing right here.*

A pretty blonde holds out her hand for me to take.

Another handshake.

*O...kay, so I’m a hand-shaker now.*

“Sorry about them, they’re Neanderthals,” she says. “I’m Pembie.” She’s model-level attractive. Taller than me, slightly slimmer, leggy, with dark brown eyes, not unlike mine. Her clearly expensive jeans fit her perfectly and, and her makeup is glamorously applied by an evidently talented hand. From the look of her brows, I would say she isn’t a natural blonde like me; however, she pulls it off. I can’t help but feel a little intimidated, despite her friendly introduction.

“Hi,” I say, returning her pleasantries as the boys bark beside us about something. “I’m Blesk.”

Her attention is suddenly redirected to the stage, and she punches Jaxon hard before telling him to hush. “Konnor’s up next. Shut up!”

Jaxon winces as he takes the hit and then gently shoves her back, which, by the scowl that transforms her face, doesn’t appear to be received graciously.

Erik leans into my ear. “Our friend is doing a speech. *God* only knows how he got the gig. I think his parents either paid the lecturers off or he’s fucking them for grades.”

“Why would you say that?”

While obviously wary of eavesdropping, Erik mutters quietly, “Because he’s a full-blown functional alcoholic. Pretty much everyone knows it, but

no one talks about it.”

“There he is!” Pembie points enthusiastically as a guy strides on stage. The oval erupts in wolf whistles and hoots.

Air floods my lungs and my breath catches when he turns to face the engaged crowd. He’s undeniably gorgeous. And while I can’t make out his eye colour or the exact shade of brown his hair is, I can tell he’s strong by the way his shoulders and chest fill his shirt.

“Slater! Yewww,” Jaxon yells, cupping his mouth with both hands.

“Konnor!” Pembie screams and claps through her enormous beaming smile.

“Hey, everyone, I’m Konnor Slater,” he begins. His husky voice makes me feel a little lightheaded. I shuffle my feet nervously while my eyes stay anchored to the stage ahead. “Education is not an option. It is not a right. It is the foundation of human existence. Education is not for the young, the clever, or the articulate. It’s for everyone. It’s not for a term, a semester, or a year. Education is forever.”

Where the crowd gave him a big rowdy welcome, they are all now silent, a clear show of their respect for his words, specifically, and his presence, in general.

Konnor continues, “I would love to stand up here and tell you all that you have the option to embrace or ignore education, that you are privileged enough to choose, but in my opinion there is only one choice. Education is in everything you do. It’s in the way you dress, in the way you move. It produces greatness and tears it down. It is the backbone of every inspiration. But, most importantly, it enables.

“It enables us to be anything we want to be. I know for a fact that intelligence is not the foundation of success.” He pauses momentarily. “I’m standing up here, aren’t I?” He chuckles at his own expense, invoking laughs and claps for a few moments from the audience. “It is not money or family. It has nothing to do with your past. All that matters is right now! The decision you make to move forward. The decisions you make for your future. The past is just that, it’s passed.”

He paces the stage with the microphone clutched in his hand and makes a generous effort to glance at as many different sets of eyes as possible. “Education will change your world; it will open it up and brighten it. Count yourself lucky every day and teach everyone around you and enable them.

Enable them to teach you. Thank you.” He begins to walk off stage but stops to yell out, “Watch me leave, ladies.”

*And he’s a Show Pony too...*

I let out a big breath I hadn’t realised I was holding and then attempt to tame what feels like a big ridiculous grin. Looking around, I realise that watching him interact so seamlessly with hundreds of people in such a compelling way hasn’t only made me admire him, but everyone else, too. Nearly every girl around me is flushed and restless.

*Konnor Slater.*

The sea of his peers applauds him as he descends the stairs to the right of the microphone. Pembie claps so hard I swear she may bruise her palms. Craning her neck to find him in the crowd, she disappears towards him.

“He was really good,” I say to Erik without removing my eyes from the charismatic guy who is now standing with Pembie in his arms. They look wonderful together. She obviously idolises him.

Erik scoffs. “Yeah, he knows it, too.”

“Like you can talk, Mr Centre Stage,” I smirk.

“God,” he points both thumbs at his chest, “Remember?” He laughs and nods suggestively towards a group of attractive young girls sitting on the grass in front of us.

I snap my fingers at him to draw his attention back to me. “I could never stand up there and do that,” I say once he ceases his inappropriate eyeballing.

He spins to face me and shrugs. “What? Yeah, right. You *sing* in public, Blesk.”

I shake my head fiercely. “That’s *totally* different. I don’t even look up, and I don’t interact. I just pretend no one’s around.”

His eyes crinkle as he grins at me. I’m immediately suspicious. “And on that topic,” he grabs a slip of paper out from his back pocket, “I got you a job.”

My jaw drops. “Come again?” I take the slip from his hand and read the typed text, mouthing as I go.

**Grill Bar O Campus, Tuesday & Fridays, 7:00 pm. Marcus Donnelly 0407789659.**

I peer up at him questioningly. “What, like waitressing?”

He turns his nose up. “No way, it’s a gig. They want you to play a few sets two nights a week. Marcus listened to ‘Hero Boy’ on my phone and

loved it.”

*Not that song, Erik.*

I get lightheaded for a moment. “I don’t want to play here,” I gulp, trying not to sound ungrateful. “I have to see these people every day.”

I can usually lose myself in the music enough to forget about the audience. What differs greatly in this situation is that I will see my audience in class, at the coffee shop, in my dorm, everywhere—I can’t pretend they don’t exist.

“Whoa, you have officially lost all the colour in your face,” Erik mocks. He cups my cheeks and directs my nervous gaze to him. “Pretend it’s just me out there.”

“What are you two talking about?” Jaxon asks, moving closer to us.

Erik lowers his hands and wraps one protectively around my shoulder, squeezing gently. “Blesk’s gonna sing at The Grill a few nights a week.” He sounds eager and filled with pride. All I feel is nausea.

Jaxon chuckles at my forced smile. “You look shit scared.”

I clear my throat. “No, I’ll be fine. I just, I ummm, I’m *really* thirsty,” I stammer. I whirl away from his scrutiny and stumble. Erik catches me by the elbow, and holds me firmly in place while Jaxon cracks up.

“I’m fine.” I rub my face, trying to hide my discomfort to no avail. “Seriously I’m fine.” Jaxon has positioned himself to my side and is looking at me with what I believe to be pity.

“Are you going to do it?” Erik asks. “I can call Marcus right now and tell him no. I can make something up, like, you’re a big Bebe and don’t want to sing in public.” He and Jaxon both chuckle.

*Why does he insist on making me feel small, purposely using his pet name for me when he knows I can’t stand it?*

“No, don’t. I’ll do it,” I say, presenting a more believable smile.

“What do you play?” Jaxon asks, folding his arms across his chest and purposely accentuating his bulging biceps.

*Yes, Jaxon, I can see your muscles.*

I slide the strap of my bag across my shoulder. “Just an acoustic guitar.”

As the wind increases, my skirt shimmies up in the breeze. I use one hand to hold my skirt down and the other to hold my hair to one side. Jaxon notices my discomfort and grins. My brows furrow and I tilt my head at him as he takes a nice, long, noticeable look at my thighs while my skirt is swishing around.

“Don’t be humble, Blesk. She writes her own stuff, sings and plays. She’s unreal,” Erik boasts.

Jaxon smirks and cocks a brow suggestively. “Can’t wait to see you up there.”

I refuse to acknowledge his double entendre. “Thanks.”

\*\*\*

My building is only a five minute walk from the library, and once you pass the peculiar gargoyles that guard the steps at its entrance, the rest of the building is relatively modern. The hallways are lit around the clock, and it’s a female-only dormitory which sets Erik at ease. The sun is just about to set behind low-lying clouds, and as we walk up the steps carrying the last of my luggage inside, the chill of the hour is apparent at our backs. My arms are weighed down by cases filled with only my most essential possessions. I don’t really do clutter. Or trinkets. Or do-dads. Or pictures.

I approach room seventy-three then freeze at the threshold to my home for the next year.

*I’m excited!*

*I’m crazy scared!*

Universities see brilliance, innovation, and creative genius stream through them. This room has probably been the keeper of an incredible mind. I drop my cases to the floor and stand in front of it, mystified by its presence. I wouldn’t be surprised if it needs a secret password.

It’s a part of my life right now but, more importantly, for a little while, I’ll be a part of its.

“You gonna go in?” Erik asks eyeing me questioningly.

I sigh. “Yes, it’s just . . .” I spin to look at him, “this is my home for the next year and I want to really take it all in.”

He snorts. “Weirdo.”

I take an exaggerated deep breath, set my cases down and savour the moment before sliding my key into the hole and twisting it until it clicks. The door swings open, I pick up my cases and step into the room slowly.

“Hi!” A girl yells, jumping up from her seated position on the room’s central rug. “Hi, I’m Elise.”

She yanks a case from my hand, carries it over and drops it on a bed. I like that she doesn't try to shake my hand.; we're already passed formalities.

"This is your bed. I've been waiting for you all day. Did you go to orientation? How old are you? I've been so nervous to meet you. I really hope we can be friends. I really hope we get along. It'll make this year so much easier. Sorry. I don't mean to come on so strong."

I freeze, wide-eyed, and a little overwhelmed by her peppiness. "Umm, hi. I'm Blesk," I finally manage.

"What kind of name is that? Is it religious or something, like Bless?" She asks straightway with way too much eagerness, jiggling in place.

Erik strides in. "Whoa, slow down, kid, she just got here. How much coffee have you had?" He chuckles.

Her beam drops, and she pauses, staring at Erik whose looking smug. "Hi," she murmurs with a gulp. "Just one coffee."

He gives her a slightly patronising glance. "I didn't actually need an answer to that. It was rhetorical. But, no, her name is not religious, it's just her name. She's twenty-one and yes, we just left orientation. Calm down, kid."

My mouth is still open mumbling an answer to one or maybe all of her questions before I realise Erik has now addressed them.

*I can answer for myself, Erik.*

"Sorry." I walk over to Elise who looks like she just took a punch. "I'm Blesk Bellamy, and it's really nice to meet you."

I glare at Erik, flashing him a firm look of disapproval. She glances around the room as Erik relocates all my bags from the hallway into the empty space on the carpet.

Elise is small, petite in every way. If Pippi Longstocking and Edward Scissorhands had a daughter, she would look like Elise. Beady blue eyes peer through brown, horn-rimmed glasses, and the sweetness of her freckles contradict the attitude of her black eyeliner and mismatched nail polish. She's quite striking.

The room is smaller than I expected but has nearly everything I could possibly need, so no complaints here; two beds, two desks and two walk-in robes. Elise's side already has her personal touches influencing the space. She displays in one fashion or another a lot of traditional girl-trends. Katy Perry. Lady Gaga. Ryan Gosling. I sigh and study my undecorated side of



the room. I hope she won't be disappointed by my lack of self-defining accessories. I'm just not that kind of girl.

She leans closer to me and whispers, "Is that your boyfriend?"

"No, that's my brother."

"Ah," she crosses her legs in front of her and watches the movements across her room.

*Our room?*

Erik carries the last case in. "Right, you okay, beautiful?"

I glance at Elise, unsettled by Erik's endearment. "Yes, yes I am," I say, and I actually mean it.

Erik flashes Elise a smile and leans in to peck me on the cheek. "First night away from home, are you sure you don't wanna sleep on a mattress in my dorm? My roommate will be at his girlfriend's."

A sickening flutter fills my stomach. "Yes, I'm sure."

"What if you, ya know," he lowers his voice to barely a whisper, "have a bad dream?"

"I'll be fine," I say, as convincingly as I can.

*Will you really, Blesk?*

He nods. "Okay, Bebe." He turns to Elise, and his grin widens with mischief. "Call her Bebe, it drives her cra—"

"Time to leave, Erik," I cut in, placing both hands on his chest and pushing him until he's just outside the doorway.

He chuckles at me sweetly. "Alrighty. I have classes all day tomorrow, but I'll pick you up from here at 6:15 to take you to The Grill."

"Yep, okay." I gently shove him again, so he knows I'm ready to close the door.

He stands in place. "Goodnight then."

"Goodnight."

\*\*\*

Elise can certainly talk, she just rambles giving information freely without any contemplation for how little she knows me. I begin to unpack some of my more important luggage, toiletries, bedding, clothes—nodding and gesturing appropriately towards her when warranted.

“I didn’t stay for the orientation festival,” she begins. “It was so packed when I went to look, and I was all alone. Everyone already seemed to know each other, and that’s when I came to the conclusion that as room mates we need to stick together. I mean, we are both new and—”

*I am going to have trouble keeping up with you, Elise.*

Despite my minimalistic existence, I’m starting to feel overwhelmed squeezing my life into the restricted space on the left side of this room. I take a bubble-wrapped parcel out and unwrap it to reveal a precious ornament—a palm-sized, metal unicorn, which holds unparalleled sentimental value.

*Okay, so I have one trinket.*

I stare at its sharp pointy horn and run my index finger over the right uplifted front hoof, shivering as I remember the day he gave it to me. I consciously take a deep breath in then exhale slowly. I do this repeatedly, in an almost meditation style of calming my nerves. My unicorn goes on my bedside table so that I can see it every morning when I wake up.

Elise continues, “You don’t know many people, and I don’t know many people. Oh wait. . . you don’t know many people, right?”

I shake my head. “Only Erik.”

She grins wider. “Cool. My mum went here, she said her roommate was like family, and they even requested to stay together second year when they switched rooms and are still friends today. In her first week at uni—”

“I think,” I interrupt, then I pause for a moment while she halts her mouth momentum. “I’d love to listen to some music while I unpack. What do you think?”

She brightens and bounces to her feet. “I’ll put my Spotify mix on!”

“Sounds great,” I agree while watching her move with such strange buoyancy around the room.

Elise is like a cartoon character, bouncing instead of walking, and beaming with joy instead of offering a simple smile.

*I think I like this girl.*

While she puts some poppy sounding track on, I collect an assortment of products to take to the shower and grab some lounging around clothes. I brush my hair up into a high ponytail and decide on black yoga pants, a mint tee-shirt, and dance flats.

“I’m going to have a shower,” I say, opening the door while clutching my toiletries and clothes. “Where’s the bathroom?”

She bounds toward me, and I take an instinctive step back, allowing her space to join me in the doorway.

“Well, it’s your third left,” she explains, gesturing with her hands. “But the first two showers are gross so use the third or fourth. Also, there are only four showers on this whole floor. So, try to use them off peak. Ya know, so you get hot water. That’s what my mum told me. This was her building, too.” She takes a big breath, “See? Full of useful information.”

I offer her a genuine, gracious look, “Thank you, see you soon... *roomy*.” She brightens and I return her smile before I wander down the hallway and into the quiet of the bathroom.

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## TWO: Konnor

I watch as she sucks in little breaths through her pink lips, moaning softly. She is on her stomach, her hair creating a golden crown around the pillow. I like looking at her. Pemberton is a nicer person when she's asleep. The issues start when she opens those lips and they produce words. Her beauty disappears when that poison spits from her, disarming all in its path. I wish I could love her.

*I wish she were more lovable.*

I've spent the last hour inside her, and I love the way she feels beneath me, or on top of me—anywhere around me, really. I like her name, her brown irises, and her blonde hair. But I don't *love* her. How can I when she doesn't laugh, when she scrutinises everything I do, when she judges everyone around her? I run my fingers through her golden hair that reminds me of both a vanishing memory and a promise forever unfinished. She makes a gentle sound of pleasure in response to my touch. Is this the best it can be between us? Will she always be second best? Second to whom I'd like to know?

*You do know who, Konnor.*

It's been at least two hours since I had a drink, and I'm feeling a lot of nervous tension. Everything is brighter, clearer, harder, and I'm thinking about her fucking hair so it must be time to top-up. I roll off the mattress and try not to disturb the mean, hot, beautiful woman who is snoring sweetly at my side. Sliding my boxers up, I wander half-conscious towards the bar fridge in the kitchen.

I'm pleased with the apartment my parents leased for me this year, enough space for Pemberton and me to both exist in relative harmony. Although she has her own dorm room on campus, this apartment has seen more of her than my previous one. It's pretty swanky. I'd be happy on campus, but my folks thought that adult accommodation meant I'd be just that... adult. This apartment *is* pretty fucking nice though. Pemberton likes

nice things, and I like being inside her, so we both benefit from this arrangement.

My studio is on the top floor, the views of busy suburban life are entertaining and at times beautiful. I have a doorman, Adolf, which makes me feel a little, James Bond.

I make myself a drink and meander into the bathroom, ignoring my reflection as I enter. My clothes come off, the facet comes on and I step over the shower hob and into the steamy enclosure. I swig on my Jacks on the rocks before placing it on the tiled nib-wall to my side. The combination of both the water that is coming down hard and warm on my head, and my beverage, revives my senses. One thing Pemberton and I have in common is our love for daytime naps, or as her Italian family would say, siestas. So, at 6:30 pm on a Tuesday night, I'm just re-joining the waking world, whereas Erik and Jaxon will be at The Grill already waiting for us. I sleep a lot. I drink to feel normal. I sleep a lot because I drink to feel normal, rinse-and-repeat.

"Konnor, you have a letter from the dean!" Pemberton's harsh voice startles me.

"Okay, just leave it on the table," I reply, lathering myself up and down. I need to go back to the gym; practice was harder yesterday than it's been in years. My calves are in agony. I saw my first rugby game at age nine, and although I'd barely kicked a ball by that age, the sport seemed to resonate with me, and I with it. The outdoors, the contact, the team energy, was everything I needed.

I finish off my drink and rinse the suds off my body, hoping Pemberton will surprise me and join in. She won't. She never does. She can't wear makeup in the shower. In my humble opinion, she looks like a million bucks without makeup, but that just isn't her style.

*Why is she going through my mail?*

I wander into the kitchen while still dripping, lazily drying myself with a towel "Where is it?"

Pemberton sits at the dining room table, her long naked legs poking from beneath it. She's wearing my favourite jersey and from my angle, I can tell she's not wearing any underwear *Nice*.

My stare is quickly redirected when I notice her sitting with the letter open in front of her and is glancing over the type.

"What the fuck? You opened my mail?" I snap. "When did we get there?"

Her eyes narrow into slits and her beauty vanishes. It happens so often. "Don't talk to me like that!" she hisses. "Do you need another drink or something?"

"Give me that!" I snatch the letter from her hand as she curses at me.

**Mr B and Mrs R Slater,**

**Tuition for Konnor Slater (ID 109678) has been received. Please find enclosed invoice.**

**We would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your generous contribution to our new sporting complex. Attached for your records are the receipt and official sponsorship certification.**

**If you have any further queries, please do not hesitate to contact our office, 087654234**

**Kindest regards,  
Dean Kevin Milner**

I read the print, contemplating how my parents have afforded to prepay my tuition this year, and somehow contribute to the new sporting precinct. Both my parents, Ben and Renee, are entrepreneurs, so to speak. I never could decipher whether they are disgustingly wealthy or strategic fakers. I flick quickly through the sheets but then fold the letter and all associated documentation back into the envelope because I don't want to see any monetary figures.

"Pem, it isn't even addressed to me. This is for my parents."

She stands and grabs a drink from the bar, shoving it in my hand, "Here. This should stop your bitching."

*Why the hell am I with her?*

*For her hair, and her eyes.*

"Yes, Pemberton, I am well aware I drink too much. Thank you for enabling me." I scowl at her, but despite the manner with which she presented my drink, I take it anyway. I raise it, giving her a cocky smile, "Thank you!"

Sometimes, I search her perfect brown eyes intently, praying for them to expose some kind of gentleness or purity. They never do.

“What are you wearing?” she snipes, motioning to my naked body.

I wiggle my hips teasingly, my cock slapping my thighs as I do. “My birthday suit.”

She rolls her eyes. “No, what are you wearing to the bar?”

I pinch her on the bum as I walk into my room. “This.”

Pemberton huffs. “Seriously, I want to match!”

“It isn’t a wedding, Pem. It’s The Grill,” I call back to her as I ruffle through my clothes, searching for a pair of jeans or, at the very least, a clean pair of tracky-pants.

“Do you care about me at all? I want us to look like a couple.”

“We are a couple,” I yell to her, and then mutter under my breath, “a couple of what I dunno.”

I can just faintly make out her snide mutters. “*Arsehole*,” I think. “*Alcoholic*,” perhaps. “*Jerk*.”

I find a clean shirt. “White!”

*Now shut up!*

\*\*\*

It only took me five minutes to get dressed in semi-clean jeans and a white shirt; bloody perfect combo. I then had the mundane task of waiting for Pemberton to make an appearance, knowing she would utilise the situation to strut her sexy body around in front of me. And she did. Not that I mind. Teasing little minx. She’s wearing a skin-tight white halter dress that shows off her exceptional thighs and grips her amazing arse. She looked beautiful, and, of course, I told her as much.

My hair was still damp as we left the apartment, which sent her majesty up the wall, but I’m happily feeling the effects of my previous four bourbons, so I don’t care. We make our way into The Grill and search for a familiar face.

“There they are,” she gestures toward the lads. I point at her and lip “She’s driving me crazy,” to Jax. He nods and chuckles, knowing quite well that Pemberton can be a real pain. I notice Erik looking particularly off. He’s frowning, his lips are in a tight line.

I grab a fifty dollar note from my wallet and hand it to Pemberton. "Get me a JD and coke, beautiful?" I kiss her cheek. She's a completely different person in public, almost charming.

*Almost.*

She ducks off towards the bar, and I go to stand with the lads at one of the rear tables.

The Grill is the best place to drink on campus, besides The Basement Lounge, but I can't go there because it can only be accessed by an underground tunnel between the library and the café, and I am physically unable to go that deep underground, in any capacity. My muscles seize up and I often just pass out. I've been this way ever since I can remember. But The Grill has a good vibe. You can be rowdy or slightly more vocal than at other establishments, and our group tends to get that way sometimes.

Marcus, the proprietor, seems to have a lot of time for us, perhaps because we are regulars or maybe because we respect him when so many other drunk students don't. He's a dictator though, a real tough prick. I've had the *daunting* task of comforting many teary new barmaids. Not that I ever minded. But now my days of perpetual women are over, monogamous and all that.

Jaxon is a solid character, under the macho facade he's actually fairly sensitive. Jax and I play for the same team, and due to the extremely competitive nature of university rugby, there is an obligatory level of respect for the boys you share the field with.

Erik, on the other hand, can get under my skin. He's too fake for my liking, too maintained. Like he has shit to hide. Despite that he's still my buddy. He slept with Pembie once so perhaps my resentment stems from that incident, although I can't help but feel like there are more obscurities to him than meets the eye. He can be quite irrational and intense.

"Nice speech, Slater. Seriously you're a complete crack up. 'Watch me leave, ladies,'" Jax elbows me in the hip. "Ya bloody dickhead."

I chuckle. "Well, I just give the people what they want." Leaning my elbow next to Erik on the table, I ask, "What's the face for, dude?"

He flashes me his attention for a brief moment. "Nah, nothing."

Jax joins my side, giving me a light bump as he does. "His little sister is playing in a few moments," he mocks with a singsong voice, "and he's worrrriieddd." Jax laughs. I laugh at Jax laughing. "And she's super-hot!"



he adds. Erik stiffens and looks a little pissed off, which makes me laugh even more.

*Yep, intense.*

I'm not sure what just happened to all the air, or when it got so damn hot, or when Pemberton joined us and gave me a drink, but it all took place without my realisation. I have tunnel vision for the girl who walked out on stage and is sitting on the main stool inside the roped off area. There's another person beside her holding a harmonica, but I can't manage to draw my attention from her face long enough to see what they look like... or even decipher their gender. A strange heat radiates in my ears before pulsing almost painfully through my forehead.

*Slow down on the JDs, Konnor.*

I think the lads are having a chat. I can hear muffles of sound, but nothing reaches me in my tunnel. I squint in an attempt to get a more uninterrupted view of her. She picks up a plain-looking, brown guitar and places the pick in between her teeth as she tests each string. When her teeth bite down on that little pick, I feel the need to readjust my stance. Her concentration and the way she holds the instrument preciously is captivating. And . . . *familiar*. Her long, wavy blonde hair bounces behind her shoulders, though a few rogue strands dangle over her breasts... her exceptional breasts.

*Shit, how long have I been staring?*

I turn my gaze away from her, giving myself just enough time to confirm no one caught me staring. But my eyes become fixed on her again. I think she has brown eyes; distance makes my view problematic. She has an elegance and purity I don't think I've seen in a long time. Her bare womanly thighs are pressed gently together with the guitar positioned appropriately on her lap. She's wearing a short black dress with white polka dots and pale heels that elongate her beautiful legs. Her cheeks glow a light shade of crimson, making her hesitation visible even from my spot. She's nervous, and it's the sexiest thing I've ever seen.

*Fuck me, she is stunning.*

She speaks into the microphone, and I hear Erik hush someone. "Hi, my name is Blesk Bellamy. This song is called "Hero Boy."

Her voice hits me hard, my breath leaving in an instant. Her long graceful fingers begin to strum the guitar and the melody it inspires is

sweet, feminine, and folky. Then she starts to sing, with a pained harmonic cadence that thickens the air around me.

“You could be the truth, I could be the treason  
I could be the storm, You could be the season,  
It’s still dark at 3 pm, dark for no good reason,

Let’s do all the things we planned to do,  
Remember what we wanted to,  
My hero boy,

Ohhhh strongest boy I have ever seen

A nameless hero,  
A fameless hero,  
For all the wrong reasons hero,  
My boy hero, My hero.

You could be the seeker, I could be the sister,  
I could be the answer, you could be the asker,  
Let’s hide our words from the listener,

Let’s sing and pretend to dance,  
Be young and take a chance,  
My hero boy,

Ohhhh strongest boy I have ever seen

A nameless hero,  
A fameless hero,  
For all the wrong reasons hero,  
My boy hero, My hero.

You could be the hound, I could be the handler,  
I could be the trip, you could be the traveller,  
Let’s run from that faceless predator,

It is finally your turn to be free,

All this time it has been me,  
My hero boy.

Ohhhh strongest boy I have ever seen

And we will run from the clawless fox,  
We can unchain and unlock that box,  
Let's smash our names with blunt rocks,  
Till they disappear and no one talks.

A nameless hero,  
A fameless hero,  
For all the wrong reasons hero,  
My boy hero, My hero."

It was *extraordinary*, beautiful, and raw. Her eyes glisten with emotion towards the end. For some strange reason, so are mine.

She plays several more songs, mostly covers, and for a timeless moment during one chorus our eyes lock together for longer than is usually comfortable with strangers.

*But we aren't strangers.*

The charge in the air subsides once her set ends and I'm finally able to allow sufficient amounts of air into my lungs. As she squats to pack her guitar into its case, I catch a glimpse of her white knickers, and feel an unexplainable urge to jump up and shield her from everyone gawking.

"White. Virginal." Jax laughs, knocking me with his elbow while watching her intently.

*Fuck off, Jax.*

"Is that your sister, Erik?" I ask, observing the strange trace he is in. Not unlike the one I was in.

He glances at me. "Yeah," he answers, then wanders in her direction. "I'll go get her."

Pemberton startles me when she puts her hand on my shoulder and kisses my neck.

"Hey, my green-eyed boy, want to go make out somewhere?" She's acting cute, and that usually resonates directly in my groin. Plus she does appear just tipsy enough to do anything I want. Still, I surprise myself when I shake my head in response.

“Nah, Pem,” I hear myself say before my brain registers it. “I kinda wanna meet Erik’s sister.”

*What did I just say to my girlfriend?*

She scoffs. “I met her already. Dull and boring, trust me. No personality at all.”

I furrow my brows. “Be nice, she’s Erik’s sister.” Her eyes widen and I can tell I’ve struck a nerve. Knowing Pemberton like I do, I’d wager she’s jealous.

She clenches her teeth together and talks through them, “Don’t use that tone with me. *What?* Over a girl, you don’t even know?”

*Yep, jealous.*

I stare at her equally infuriating and gorgeous face. “Pemberton, you need to learn to play nicely with other girls.”

She tilts her head at me. “Konnor,” she whispers in my ear, baiting me, “if you don’t come outside right now, and cum in my mouth, I’m going to find someone else who will...”

*Fuck.*

\*\*\*

Since Pemberton could barely stand after a few drinks, convincing her to go to bed once I got her home and wore her out was easy. She snuggled up with the hot water bottle I made her and drifted straight off. I left a glass of water and some Panadol on her bedside table for her post-drinks headache. She looked incredible all cocooned up. Wholesome. No guards up. Just her.

After leaving Pem, I wander to Boe’s Kebabs, which is so close to The Grill, I can see the front steps. When I notice Erik’s sister sitting alone just outside the bar, my chest tightens and I find myself walking towards her.

“Hey, Slater! Your kebab!” Boe calls out.

I spin around and jog over to grab it from him, “Sorry, Bozo.”

“All good. You need me to call you a cab again?”

“Nah, I’m actually all good.” I nod at him in appreciation. “Thanks for this,” I say, gesturing to the world’s greatest kebab that is now proudly in my hand. Boe’s Kebabs is nothing like a generic chain. He uses only free-range chicken breast, and really takes an unusual amount of care in each

kebab's presentation. I have a thing about free-range products, eggs, chicken, pork. It often makes dining difficult, but it's one thing I won't waver on. No living thing should be caged for its whole life.

My apartment is a 30-minute walk from campus, a 15-minute run, and an hour drunken stumble. The latter seems to be my dominant pace average. Tonight, I feel relatively on game, having spaced my intake like the pro I truly am.

I turn back and walk toward Erik's sister again, but I slow as I approach her. Her eyes are cast down and my chest reacts instinctively with a pang of pain. When I get within a metre of her, she raises her gaze to include me. As her big brown eyes hit me, my breath hitches. *Crazy beautiful.*

To avoid standing idle like an idiot, I run a hand through my hair.

"Hey," I say, lacking my usual charisma. "I'm Erik's mate. You okay?"

*Pull yourself together.*

Her eyes are wide—dreamy and wide—encircled with long, arched, black lashes.

"Yeah, thank you, I just needed a few moments."

I turn to leave. "Oh, do you want me to go?"

"No," she says so quickly I feel warmth slither through me. "I'm Blesk."

"Yeah, I know. I'm Konnor."

"Yeah," she smiles faintly, "I know."

I sit down next to her on the step, the street lamps illuminating us in the darkness. She is elegant and curvy, spectacularly so. She peers at me over her shoulder while hidden partially behind blinds of golden locks. I'm usually the epitome of a witty conversationalist—I am Konnor Slater—but Blesk has me frozen in a strangely familiar daze.

I take a big breath, and push out the words, "What's wrong?"

She gives me a forced grin, sheepishly wiping a tear from her cheek. "I just don't like playing that song."

"Which one?" I ask.

She blinks at me, and I watch her swallow her hesitation down. "*Hero Boy.*"

"That's an awesome song," I say, trying to console her. I don't know why she's so upset. I don't know why I care why she's so upset, but I feel like it's my responsibility to make her feel better.

Her voice trembles a little as she says, “I don’t usually play with other people. I’m a soloist.”

“The harmonica sounded great, honestly.” Leaning forward on my knees, I take the opportunity to study her side profile. She’s a sad little thing. It sucks to see.

“Yeah, maybe. I just don’t want anyone else playing it.”

I don’t understand, but I feel I should... *somehow*. “Want me to talk to Marcus?”

*What are you doing Konnor? Marcus would kick your arse for interfering.*

“No, thank you,” she mutters.

*Phew.*

“Okay,” I say. I’m gripping my kebab like a bloody moron, letting all the juice from the tomato make the Turkish wrap soggy, instead of just eating it.

*Pretty girl . . . kebab . . . Pretty girl . . . kebab*

“Want to go for a walk?” I hear myself ask her.

*Girl versus kebab, 1-0.*

Her eyes brighten, her sadness slipping slightly. “Yes.”

We walk for a while in silence, which I would usually fill with quips and commentary. But this was strangely comfortable. I detour off the footpath quickly to dispose of my now sludgy kebab that could have quite possibly been the best kebab ever created. I know these paths like the back of my hand. I have walked them many times with Pemberton, with Jax, with countless girls. Tonight, though, they seem to have changed yet stayed the same. Just like I feel.

Blesk snuffles every now and then, using her finger to wipe away the stray tears that escape. I hate that she’s crying. I restrain the urge to raise my hand and brush them away for her. The wind begins to swirl her hair around. She collects it and holds it in her hand, letting it cascade down one shoulder.

*Cheer her up, Konnor.*

“Ah... Let’s do this again,” I suggest, turning abruptly to face her.

She matches my stance, frowning suspiciously at me. “O...kay,” she pauses. “Do what again?”

“Wait right here.”

I spin and walk away from her, taking ten steps before turning back to face her. She hasn't moved, though her head is a little higher and her eyes wider, observing my actions. I freeze for a moment, taking this sliver of time to study her. The little black dress hugs her torso and flares out at the waist, making her look both sweet and sexy. Her long curvy legs are exposed as she stands with a feigned confidence. Innocence and nerves bounce around in her eyes. She is extraordinarily beautiful.

*Time to act like a complete dickhead and hope no one sees me.*

I glance away and casually walk in her direction, adding a swagger to my step. A little giggle leaves her lips and that alone makes the whole performance worth it. The little sound fills my chest, just like her voice did a few hours ago.

I lightly bump into her. "Oh, hey, sorry. I didn't see you there."

Her eyes widen further.

"I'm Konnor. I'm an alcoholic. I like long pointless walks on short paths. I have more hang-ups than a telemarketer, and I hate, hate, hate, harmonica players. Don't know why. Just do."

She smiles a little. "I'm Blesk, and I don't hate harmonica players."

I shake my head in disbelief. "Really? Huh. Maybe I just haven't met a harmonica player I liked."

"You should get out more. I meet a new harmonica player I like every day."

I laugh. "Are you asking me out?"

Her jaw drops. "What? No."

"Oh, I just thought . . ." I stare at her, feigning confusion. "You don't have to be shy. I'm pretty sure you just told me I should go out with you. I don't usually do these things, but I will 'cause you're pretty cute."

Her smile grows. I soar.

*Her smile... that smile.*

"You're so corny, Konnor," she says through that smile.

"I know. Don't tell anyone," I say. "That would totally ruin my street cred."

She bats her lashes at me, and my heart skips a beat. "Your secret's safe with me."

"So, what are you studying?" I ask.

She grins. "Music."

“Cool, what are your electives?” We wander past a spot we wandered past an hour ago. I try not to notice.

*Tonight, I wish the campus was bigger.*

“I’m doing Child Development 123 and Beginners Education to Music 103,” she says. Throughout the past hour her demeanour has changed; she’s smiled more, talked more, and even laughed.

“BEM, Beginners Education to Music 103, is one of mine,” I state, with more enthusiasm than I should show.

She giggles again, my level of cool dwindles. It’s those fucking brown eyes that are doing it.

“What do you mean ‘one of mine’?” she asks. Her dress sways across her thighs as she walks, and I can’t pretend to be enigmatic and cool because I am desperate for her to give me as much of her precious time as possible.

“I’m a grad student. That’s one of my classes, so you may have me as tutor.”

“Really?” She sounds simply chipper, a lovely tone on her.

“Yeah, there’s a one-in-three chance you’ll get me,” I announce.

She twirls a lone strand behind her ear, “Will you go easy on me?”

*Ah, shit! Is she flirting with me?*

I wish I wasn’t smiling so much; my cheeks are borderline aching. “If I get you as a student then,” I pause on the yes, I’d planned to say. “No...”

She sucks a short breath in and turns to show me a grin so wide I can see her tongue poking out between her teeth. It’s so cute. “And why not?”

“Because you wouldn’t have it any other way.”

*You are taking a leap of faith here, Konnor.*

She’s silent for a while, so I press, “Am I right?”

The most unique colour of pink lights up her cheeks. “Yes, well, I don’t plan on disappointing you.”

I chuckle. “Look, I know your brother pretty well, so I haven’t set the bar very high for you. You should be fine.”

“Oh, that’s thoughtful.” Sarcasm laces her voice, and she knocks me playfully with her elbow.

“Custom Couching,” I laugh smugly. “It’s really what sets me apart from all the other graduates.”

“I thought it was the long pointless walks around campus with your female students,” she teases.



“Ouch” I chuckle, beaming at her cheeky smirk. “That too.”

We grin at each other and every part of me feels light.

“Why didn’t you go straight from high school to university?” I query. She doesn’t look like a schoolie.

Her smile disappears slightly, and I hate that my question caused that reaction. “My mum was sick. She died a few years ago.”

“Damn!” I spin and place my hands on both her shoulders so I can search her expression, “I’m so sorry, Blesk.”

She shivers, and peers down to watch my finger gently stroking her, little goose bumps dotting on her skin. Something inside me shifts and I feel a mixture of discomfort and calm.

She clears her throat and raises those lovely eyes to meet mine.

“How long have you and Pembie been together?” All the air I had captive comes rushing out at the mention of her name. I’d been trying to be in the now and forget all about my girlfriend cuddled up sweetly in bed. I drop my hands to my side, and each one mourns her skin.

I blow out harshly, again. “Pembie and I are. . .” I pause to consider the appropriate wording. I don’t want to admit she uses me for my apartment, and I use her for her body. “We’re not together in the traditional sense. It’s still pretty casual. Ya know.”

*Lame. Very, very, lame, Konnor.*

Her tongue visible between her teeth as she beams at me, knowingly.

“I only asked how long you’ve been together, Konnor.” Then she laughs from her belly and it makes the whole world shine. I don’t care that it’s at my expense. In fact, I like it.

“Right, too much information,” I chuckle, “About a year, I think.”

*What are you doing to me, Blesk Bellamy?*

When we turn the corner, and The Grill comes back into sight, I’m sledgehammered with Erik’s glare. It is dark on the steps at the entrance, but I can still clearly see he’s ready to rip me a new one. Aggression rushes from him in waves. He trudges towards us, shaking his head and scowling.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” He pulls Blesk towards him by the elbow and away from me. She gapes at him, tugging slightly from his grip. “Erik...”

“Woah, what’s wrong?” I ask, trying to control the caveman in me. “Let your sister go, mate.”

“Stay away from Blesk! She isn’t a trophy for you to achieve,” he growls at me. I look at Blesk to see her reaction to his callous words. God, I hope she knows that isn’t what this is. She looks wounded, and the sparkle I saw in her expression a few moments ago has fizzled out. He made her lose it. That has me unnervingly on edge, distractingly so. My eyes drop to where his fingers dig into her skin, and I am overcome with the need to snap them.

“Don’t look at her,” he hisses, “Look at me.”

“*Careful, Erik!*” I warn, fisting my hands at my side. “Just let Blesk go.”

“Don’t tell me what to do with Blesk. What would Pembie say about you wandering off with other girls in the dark, hey?”

“You’re being a fucking dickhead, Erik. Let your sister go.”

He lets her go, and steps towards me. “So, you fuck Pembie all day, and then come after my sister when she goes to bed?” he snarls and shoves me in the chest.

Blesk gasps and covers her mouth, her eyes filling with tears. I stare at her, silently asking her what I should do. I want to knock him out. Cold. She shakes her head, slowly, pleadingly. She clearly doesn’t like fighting, unlike Pemberton who gets aroused when blokes mash over her. Same blokes. Very different girl. Entirely different situation. I take a few steps backwards, my molars grinding slowly together.

*Don’t retaliate...*

“You’ve had too much to drink, Erik, walk home! Don’t be an arsehole to your sister.”

I’m going to need to blow off some steam before I rip his head off. I spin, and saunter away. All the muscles in my arms twitch with rage, and I need to get as far away from him, and her, and them together, as possible. Heat spreads through me, and I growl under my breath.

*"Fucking Erik! Fucking Erik!"*

The whole event is replaying in my mind like a damn broken record. That hurt look in her eyes has me livid. Rushing away from them, I cross the road and begin to jog home. Why would he behave like that? I knew that guy had a problem with me. When I picture her sad little face again, I jolt to the side and take my anger out on a trash can. It clangs loudly and rolls across the path, spilling its contents everywhere. I throw my fist into a tree on the verge side. *Thud*. The pain of my knuckles shifting within my

hand hits me like a bullet to the head. But the need to hit something in that moment was undeniable. A hiss rushes through my larynx, and I try to wave the ache away. The tree is fine; however, my first is bludgeoned and bleeding.

*Tree versus Konnor, 1-0.*

I wish I hadn't left her with Erik. I feel uncomfortably, intensely protective of her, which doesn't seem rational. I didn't think I could ever feel this way again.

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## THREE: Blesk

As Elise's alarm plays the full version of Katy Perry's "Firework," and my eyes flutter open to the faintly lit dorm room I now call home, I am inundated with flashes of how last night ended. Erik pushing Konnor. Konnor walking away without saying goodbye. Me doing absolutely nothing to stop either of them. Erik and I barely spoke on the walk back to my dorm; however, Erik can deliver a comprehensive lecture with a single look. Konnor and Erik are '*friends*,' and yet they clearly don't share any mutual respect. Whether they like each other at all is yet to be seen. The "Konnor character" described by Erik is not the same Konnor I was walking with for over an hour. That Konnor was sweet. Funny.

I reach for my phone and check the time: 9:00 a.m. Luckily, I don't have class until 2:30. There are two missed calls and two messages, all from Erik.

The first one said:

'I'm sorry about last night, Blesk. I flipped out when I couldn't find you. I'll talk to you after class today.'

And the second:

'Please pick up your phone so I know you're okay.'

\*\*\*

I'm not ready to forgive Erik for his behaviour, and if my previous actions hold any weight in depicting my future ones, then it's probably best if I stay clear of him until I'm ready. I don't argue with my brother. He has done too much for me, and I've put him through too much. Forgiving him really is my only option, but I'm not ready to yet. So I'll avoid him until I am.

Elise rolls over to click her alarm off and looks towards me. I'm gazing at the rug in between our two beds, with my phone clasped under my chin.

"Hey," she murmurs sleepily as I turn to face her. "You okay? You were crying last night. I heard you." Her messy bed hair is adorable in a loose bun, and her eyes look even more blue without her glasses.

I shuffle further under the covers. "Yes, I'm fine."

"Wanna talk about it?" she asks, tucking her hands under her face in preparation for my confessions. "I promise I'm an excellent listener."

I giggle. Given our previous conversations that statement seems rather funny. "I'm sure you are."

She gives me a sad half-smile. "Is it about a boy?"

*It's about two.*

I spin to face the foreign white ceiling, and I pause for apparently too long because she doesn't wait for a reply.

"Well, I'm here if you ever need me," she states adamantly. "Wanna go to the showers together?" She pulls back her pink bed sheets and moves across the room, collecting up her toiletries. I observe her, and it's obvious by her downcast face that she wants us to share a *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* kind of relationship, where we mess around, choreograph best friend dances, and gossip about boys. I wish I could give her that.

*I wish I wanted that, too.*

Sitting up in my bed, I push my blue cotton blanket down my thighs and rub my face back to life with both palms. I glance down at my kitten print nightgown, tracing the patterns with my finger tip. I was in such a daze last night I don't even remember putting it on. My dad always tells me I dress younger than is customary for my age group. My excuse is that I've been denied a fair amount of fashion development, so my defining trend is yet to be established. We didn't have much money growing up, so for a long time I was a refuge shopper. I got quite good at it, really.

Two posters decorate the wall my bed is pressed against. A quote by [Paulo Coelho](#), "If you are brave enough to say goodbye, the world will give you a new 'hello,'" and a world map. That's the best I can do for now.

Elise is standing in the doorway when she bends to pick something up. "Blesk, there's something here for you!"

"What's it say?" I slide off the bed and wander over to join her. My cheeks heat up as I read the note.

*Blesk,  
I hope I didn't get you in too much Treble.  
Good news is, the bar is so low now,  
Erik just guaranteed you at least a distinction.  
All you have to do is show up, and I'll be imp  
K*

“Why is trouble spelt like that? And what’s that little shape?” Elise asks, handing me both the note and the accompanying little black rectangular box. I brighten, my cheeks getting even warmer. She searches my face as I bite down on my lower lip, attempting to conceal the bizarre grin that is escaping.

“It’s a musical reference,” I sigh. “That shape is a rest. He’s being... *corny.*”

She beams at me, mirroring my grin. “*He?*”

I twist to face her eager expression as we both fill the doorway. “Yes... *He.*”

Her lips stretch further, and she motions towards the box I’m tightly clasping. “What do you think is in there?”

“I don’t know,” I whisper playfully, raising a brow in anticipation. “Let’s find out.”

Taking a seat on my bed and staring at the box, I run my index finger over the engravings before displaying its contents. Inside is a shiny, silver harmonica. I cover my heart and exhale steadily. Elise sinks down beside me, silent with suspense. This is just so... *sweet*. I mumble under my breath, “why. Who is this guy.”

“Wow,” Elise says. “You’ve been here one day, and you’re already getting presents from guys. Why did he give you that?”

I relax into a sigh again, breathing out and loosening my shoulders. “So I can learn it,” I manage to say. “And play solo.” A silly smile stretches across my cheeks as I raise the harmonica to my chest and hold it firmly against my rapid heartbeat. I almost want to cry, but I don’t. There’s no way he could know *just* how much this means to me. I need to thank him, especially after the way last night ended. It’s just too powerful a gift to not reciprocate.

*He doesn't think I'm a trophy.*

\*\*\*

The lady behind the counter at the admissions office doesn't like me, or maybe she doesn't like the world, but either way it's apparent in the way she glares at me over her glasses.

"I'm not a stalker." I give her a wide-toothed smile. "I just have Mr Slater for a class, and I need to find a way to contact him."

"Is. That. Right?" She snickers, scrutinising me from head to toe. "Mr Slater seems to get a fair number of female students needing his digits. " Her long wiry fingers make air quotes when she says *digits*.

*I bet he doesn't leave them all notes and musical instruments.*  
She looks at me like I'm a desperate skank.

"Mrs . . . ?" Elise cuts in, leaning across the desk as she reads the nametag pinned to the woman's cardigan. "Mckenzie. Mr Slater has Miss Bellamy's wallet. She left it at the bar last night, and he found it. She plays there Tuesdays and Fridays. You can check. *He* called her, telling her to pick it up." I shove her lightly in the stomach with my elbow, in an attempt to stop the lies she is stacking like dominos. She deflects me without removing her gaze from Mrs Mckenzie. "Mr Slater gave her the address, but she lost it, and she doesn't have any way to contact him. She has to say goodbye to her *terminally ill* grandma at the hospital tonight and has no money for a cab. She is her only fam—"

"Alright! God, girls," Mrs Mckenzie snaps, holding up her hand to stop Elise talking. Her brows knit as she spins to face her computer and punches various keys, huffing slightly under her breath. She isn't buying Elise's lies, that's for sure. While her back is to us, I make a little *eeeeeeek* sound and sneak a peek at Elise, who has given the word *composure* a new meaning. She is a proactive little schemer, and her level-headedness tells me this is not her first rodeo.

*I definitely like this girl.*

Mrs Mckenzie turns back to face us and fakes a smile that is more patronising than friendly. "Here you go, girls." She slaps a sheet of paper on the desk and watches as I slide it into my pocket.

"Thank you, Mrs Mckenzie. It's been a real treat spending this time with you." I giggle through a contorted smirk. Her right brow lifts at my

sarcasm, and my cheeks begin to burn. I can't believe those snarky words just came out of *my* mouth.

"Bye." Else grabs my hand and tugs me swiftly out of the office and around the corridor. We both sprint, arms flailing, while buzzing with adrenaline and laughing hysterically. I can't remember the last time I laughed like this. We halt when we reach the quad and gasp for air between giggles. I clutch my stomach that is tight with stitches and spasms, and to my surprise, it's a delightfully welcome feeling.

"I was trying to be so serious, but you... oh my god." She's panting, trying to suppress her laughter. "*It's been a real treat,*" she quips, mimicking me. We both slump back onto the grass.

Blues, greens, and whites mark the sky. Thin fluffy clouds hide the sun's intensity, and the wind ruffles tree limbs around us.

I curl onto one shoulder and peer at her. "You've done that before..."

Still breathing heavily, she smirks. "That's what girlfriends do."

"I guess..." I flash her my most grateful smile, "I guess I've never really had one before."



## FOUR: Liz

The girl can't stop her tears this time, no matter how hard she forces her eyes shut, breathing slowly and willing them away. She can't stop the whimpers from gurgling up her throat, bile and heat coating her tongue. She can't stop her heart from slamming into her ribs, forcing tremors from her ears to her toes. She won't be able to stop. Not now. Not until her new brother stops screaming. All she can do is shudder silently in her seat and watch her daddy talk to the man outside the car. She hopes her tears and sobs stop before her daddy climbs in beside her.

Her daddy returns and moves into the driver's seat, switching on the ignition and frowning at the road. She sits in fear, staring ahead. Silent. Unwavering. The car cruises slowly through The District, navigating the lamp-lit streets on the way back home. The tires grind into the unsealed front driveway and come to a sudden stop, echoing through the estate. She runs inside the house. He does not follow; he needs to get her new brother out first. The girl rushes into the kitchen, and with her shaky hands, tries to pour her dad a drink. *Ice. Brown drink next. Bit of water.* She repeats this over and over, knowing she always forgets something. *Ice. Brown drink next. Bit of water.* Her hands keep shaking, the ice chinking the glass. Her breath gushes out hard and fast. *Ice. Brown drink next. Bit of water.*

When the flywire slams and his steps boom through the house, she freezes. He bellows her name. Her spine seizes. Out of nowhere his knuckles connect with her cheek, sending a surge of heat to the back of her eye. *Whack.* Her little body hits the floor with a thud. She withers below him, his shadow blackening the ground around her huddled frame. She scoots backwards until the bench hits her spine, and a gasp wrestles its way up her throat. His eyes are slits. Hers are wide. She knew this would happen; she knew as soon as the first defiant tear slipped out. He hovers over her, leans down and fists her hair. She screeches as she's dragged

through the house, feet kicking the carpet, garbles of sounds rolling up her larynx, her body gyrating, her back sliding...

The floor creaks below his feet, protesting the anger manifesting through his stomps. She keeps sliding.

"Daddy," her voice shakes violently, "Please."

She presses down on her hair, holding the roots to her fragile head, trying to soothe the burn on her scalp.

*Please, daddy, stop.*

She keeps sliding, her heels throbbing from slamming against the floor, desperately fighting for freedom. Her scalp is raw. She knows crying is pointless. She knows pleading is pointless. She knows nothing can stop him now.

"Lizzy, *goddamn it*, I've warned you! Do you think I enjoy this?"

"Daddy," she whimpers. "I'm sorry."

"Tonight, I needed a good girl. Not a bad girl."

The furniture flashes by, each piece blurring together into a stream of wood. She remembers the last time he was this angry; the image of his tight face still churns her stomach.

She hasn't cried in a long time. She has become very good at holding her tears inside, ignoring the stinging behind her eyes and breathing slowly. *Manipulative*. Her daddy once told her crying is 'a girl's way of manipulating us.' She never knew who *us* was. She still doesn't know what *manipulating* means. But, she knows deep to her core that she doesn't want to be it.

She slides through the bedroom door and crumples up the rug as her body is dragged onto it. He tugs her up by her hair until she is on her feet, but she stumbles, taking her own weight. Her lip is trembling.

*Daddy, stop.*

Her eyes plead with his. She can't help it. His large rough fingers wrap around her throat and the air is squeezed out, hissing through her gaping mouth. Her eyes widen.

She knows her mum died. But she doesn't understand the concept of dying. The girl *does* understand fear, desperation, and helplessness. She hopes that isn't what dying is, because if it is, then she is dying every day. A buzzing begins in the girl's head as oxygen leaves her system. He tightens his grasp, crushing, draining, shaking, tighter, until the girl's eyes close and she goes limp.

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## FIVE: BLESK

My cowboy boots shuffle through the leaves, and my long hair swishes around me as I wander the streets, searching for the right apartment building. I have no intention of knocking or going in. I just want to leave a thank-you note

After a half hour of navigating my way to his building, I find myself outside the lobby. I now have the impulse to run back before anyone sees me. I don't, but I should. The building has one of those grand entrances with a doorman and floor-to-ceiling glazed windows.

*It's just a thank you note.*

Then I'm leaving. No harm done. No rules broken. No lines crossed. Ebullient

As I wander over the threshold, I'm greeted by a smiling older man.

"Good morning, young lady. Who are you here to see?" He has an odd accent, European but laced with the Australian twang. His suit is elegant, and he wears it confidently. There is a nametag below his right collar, but I'm too dumbfounded by his presence to read it.

"Umm, I just want to leave something for someone. He won't be home, anyway," I say, trying not to fidget.

"What is your name, Miss?" he asks, leaving his desk and approaching my side. "Are you on the visitors list?"

"Umm, I'm Blesk Bellamy and... umm." I bite down hard on my lower lip and twiddle my fingers awkwardly around my hair. "I won't be on the list."

*Stop fidgeting.*

"And who are you here to see?"

I blink at him several times before answering. "Konnor Slater."

"Yes, Miss, he is home. I will call him for you," he states kindly, the corner of his eyes wrinkle with lines that denote his warm nature.

“Please—” I nearly lunge to stop him from walking towards the desk phone. “I just want to leave him something.”

He stops and leans towards me. “Miss Bellamy, he will want to see you. Let me call him?” He nods at me and waits for me to agree in the same fashion. I nod.

*He will want to see me?*

“Um, okay, thank you,” I murmur with a gulp. I begin to gasp, not having planned on actually *seeing* Konnor. My hair is a mess from the wind, my dress is too short, my face is flushed, and my boots... *oh* my stupid boots!

The man is on the phone, but due to distance his voice is barely audible. I take this moment to look around the lobby. Two mirrored elevators flash with activity at the rear, and there is a small sitting area opposite the reception desk. The tiled floor is reflective, the high ceilings display various feature lighting, and ornamental trees are scattered tastefully around the room.

“Miss Bellamy?” the man calls out.

I whip around, grinning nervously. “Yes, sir?”

He chuckles and shakes his head. “Don’t call me *sir*. I’m Adolf.”

“Oh, sorry.” I walk towards him. “I’m Blesk. Oh, well, I guess you know that already.”

*Stop babbling.*

“He said go on up. It is apartment 1002. That is level 10. Room 2. Here’s a card for the elevator.” I take it hesitantly.

“Thank you.” I look at the card for a while, motionless. I hear Adolf chuckle, probably at me.

“He said he would usually come to collect you, Miss Bellamy, but,” he peers up in contemplation, “he can’t this time.”

“That’s fine, I wouldn’t expect him too,” I say. I muster my resolve, spinning and striding towards the elevators.

The elevator stops at the top floor, pinging as the doors open into the hallway. I move quietly, passing various doors until I get to apartment 1002. I stop and stare at it.

*Just knock...*

I’m positive the masses can walk through doors without a fully comprehensive analysis of what could be behind it, and how that could change what is outside of it. It reminds me of a quote by Robert Frost,

“Before I built a wall, I’d ask to know what I was walling in or walling out.”

I raise my fist and knock delicately, secretly hoping he won’t hear me. The door immediately swings open.

*Oh god.*

He’s shirtless, his bicep is flexing beside his head while he dries his wet hair with a towel, and his torso is etched with trim muscles. My jaw drops open.

*Close your mouth, Blesk...*

Tiny beads of water slide down his chest, and little tufts of hair run from his navel to the seam of his jeans. I gulp and dart my eyes to meet his, which I quickly find doesn’t help my rapid pulse, because *his* are beautiful. The most perfect shade of green.

And they’re kind.

“Blesk, sorry about,” he lowers his arm to his side, “not being better presented.”

*Oh, I like your presentation. High Distinction from me.*

My mouth flaps without making a sound, because simultaneously talking and perving is difficult.

A knowing grin plays on his lips.

“Are you checking me out, Miss Bellamy?”

“Oh my God,” I say, mortified. “No, I just wanted to give you this.” I hand him the envelope. Actually, I throw it at him.

“Please, come inside.” He waves me in.

My feet decide to stroll cautiously into his apartment before I give them permission to. I survey the open floor plan apartment. Furniture is used to designate sections and the bedroom area in the far corner is mostly hidden by a large bookcase. There is a door at the back also, perhaps it leads to a bathroom. The lounge area is opposite the front door, which I am currently hesitant to move too far from. The apartment is trendy. Graphic designs and famous street-art posters embellish the exposed brick walls. The kitchen boasts all stainless steel appliances and a large stone counter top. It’s cool. It’s very... him.

“Wanna drink?” He strides over to the kitchen where he pours himself a glass of liquor, pinning me with his eyes every time he looks up from his drink.

“I really didn’t want to disturb you. I just wanted to thank you for the harmonica. How did you manage to get it by 9am?” I ask, taking a step closer to him. His eyes are glued to me as he throws back a mouthful of his drink.

“You’re not disturbing me. What’s with the formalities, Blesk? Feeling weird about being here?”

I giggle, and that makes him smile, etching two perfect dimples onto either side of his lips. Everything about him is oddly comforting, including his dimples.

“Is it that obvious?” I ask.

He manoeuvres around the kitchen bench and stands beside me. “Is it because I might be your tutor or because Erik told you to stay away from me?”

“A bit from column A and a bit from column B,” I admit, folding my lip between my teeth and chewing on it nervously.

He laughs loudly. “Well, *fuck* both columns, ’cause they don’t matter. Erik can get over it. You’re not in high school.”

“So, fraternising with your students is fine?” I ask. He strolls over to the lounge area and slumps down on the couch. He tilts his head towards the cushion beside him in an obvious “get over here” gesture. He drapes his arm over the back and tucks his knee up to one side to face me.

His eyes narrow. “Define *fraternising*?”

“You aren’t my English teacher, Mr Slater.” I smile at him because something about our conversation seems to justify it.

“It’s probably frowned upon. But... we’re pretty much the same age,” he says, while watching me intently as I circle the couch and then sit across from him on the single recliner, a coffee table separating us. The cushion is hard. This is clearly the kind of fancy furniture that is more for cosmetic purposes than actual use.

He tilts his head. “So, did you like it?”

“Yes,” I whisper, and I can feel my eyes crinkle as I beam at him.

“Good,” he exclaims, and takes another swig.

“So, what do I need to do to get a High Distinction? Or does it depend on the bar? In that case, what does Erik need to do?” I immediately wish I hadn’t said it in such a flirtatious way.

His leans forward and grins. “I’ll get back to you.” His words are slurred. My brows knit as I notice how glossy his eyes are and how his

glass is swaying in his grasp. The brown liquid sloshes up the edges, nearly spilling over, like waves inside a pool.

“Konnor?” I stand up. “Are you drunk?”

“Do I look drunk?” he asks, steadying himself on the arm rest.

I peer down at him, and frown. “A little.”

He leans back in defeat. “I am, yeah,” he admits. “I didn’t expect company.”

“It’s barely 12...” I say, walking around to sit next to him. He doesn’t say anything, just puts his drink down, leans his elbows on his knees and rubs his face with both palms. I know he drinks, but this doesn’t seem—What did Erik call it?—*functional*.

“Blesk...” He whispers my name so softly I barely hear it. “I’m sorry. If I knew you were going to be here . . .” He winces. “Shit, I’m sorry. Today is a... a bad day for me.”

“Why?” I ask.

“I lost someone today.”

“I’m sorry, Konnor.” My stomach knots up seeing him so miserable. I barely know him, but his agony affects me. He releases his face and turns to look at me through bloodshot eyes that are clearly fighting back tears. The heartache behind them makes me want to cry, too.

He chews on the inside of his mouth, and then says, “I tried to sober up for you with a shower, but, apparently, that didn’t work,” he slurs.

“It’s midday on a Wednesday, Konnor.” I place my hand on his knee, and it feels completely natural.

He opens his mouth to say something, but no words come out. Then he shakes his head vigorously as if to physically dislodge the train of thought. “Fucking forget about it, Blesk. Just go home.”

My mouth goes slack. “I’m judging you. It’s just... it doesn’t feel right leaving you like this.”

He grabs his glass, necking its entire content, and then brushing my hand off him. “Seriously, I’m not your fucking responsibility.”

Something about what he just said makes my heart beat hard against my ribcage.

*He’s a mess, and he’s right. I should leave.*

I stand and stride quickly towards the front door. Coming here was a mistake. I barely even know him.

*What was I thinking?*



“Blesk... Wait.” I hear a piece of furniture slide across the floor, but I don’t stop until I have my hand on the handle. He slams his body against the door, blocking my way out. He dips his head and looks at me through eyes at half-mast. “Have I fucked this up?”

“What is *this*?” I murmur, looking sadly at him. I don’t *want* to want to stay. As he said, he isn’t my responsibility. But that doesn’t stop the feeling sitting in my belly like a boulder.

His brows furrow. “*This*, Blesk.” The look of anguish on his face is heartbreaking.

*There is a this.*

Konnor is only inches from me, and his mere proximity makes me dizzy. His eyes watch every movement I make. His gaze follows me when I lick my lips, when I squeeze my eyes shut to fight back the discomfort, when I swallow hard... and I can still feel them on me when I finally look away. Although there is nothing intimidating about his energy, he still manages to make my heart race. With a strengthening breath, I glance up into his hooded green eyes. They’re so beautiful, and so... sad. I press my hand against his cheek and when he moves into my touch, we both exhale on contact.

*How can I feel so comfortable, and so nervous all at once?*

My whole body responds to the feeling of him below my touch. He closes his eyes as I stroke his cheekbone.

Finally, his eyes open and focus on me. “Don’t leave, Blesk. I’m sorry I’m being a dick.”

I give him a little smile. “You’re not half as corny when you’re drunk.”

He relaxes his head against the door behind him and breathes heavily through a crooked smile. “I’ll work on that for you, Miss Bellamy.”

Konnor gets worse over the next hour, until he’s a wreck. Now I can only understand approximately a third of everything he says, but that’s not going to deter me. I’m not leaving him. I couldn’t, even if I wanted to. Every part of me is needed right here. He lost someone and his grief is drowning him.

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After I reluctantly watched him down another three drinks, I managed to convince him to lay down and rest in bed, but he didn't want me to leave. So, I joined him. We're laying on his mattress, facing each other, our knees pressed together. My hair is fanned out around me, and he won't stop touching it. He stares at his finger as he twirls a strand around it until there is nothing left to twirl, releases it, then starts again. He's in his own head, and barely conscious of me. He's back *there*, with the person he lost. I understand that look.

I can't explain what's happening, or why I have this urge to be with him, or why I feel liable for him...

He gazes into my eyes. "The sun... your hair reminds me of the sun."

I stiffen slightly, but then shake off the memories associated with that comparison. "That's really corny, Konnor."

He splutters on a laugh, "Haven't you heard? My new middle name?"

"Konnor "Corny" Slater," I giggle.

A huge drunken smile engulfs his face. "God, I love it when you make that sound," he says with a pleased sigh. I immediately giggle again, a nervous reaction. Then, we are both smothered in goofy grins, and neither of us does a thing to hide them. Now he's back *here*. With me.

"You're beautiful, you know that," he gushes. "And I'm a dickhead like acting."

I giggle at his backwards sentence. "Yeah," I smile at him, "but this isn't you."

He cocks a brow sceptically. "And how would you know that?"

"I don't know, but I do. You haven't disappointed me yet, Konnor," I murmur, refusing to fight against whatever force is making it impossible for me to take my eyes off him.

He chuckles. "Well, you mustn't have set the bar very high for me."

I bite my lip and speak through my silly smile. "All you have to do is show up."

A knock breaks through our world, and we both freeze, narrowing our eyes questioningly at each other. My heart skips a beat when his eyes widen with realisation, and he jolts up, grabbing his head at what I can only imagine is a pretty immediate head rush.

"Konnor!" A girl's voice barks through the door. "I don't like waiting."

"Shit!" he mutters, jumping to his feet. He scavenges around the floor for a shirt.

*Pembie.*

He slides a shirt over his head before turning to look at me, guilt blanketing his expression. I act nonchalant, with a quick shrug of my shoulders, and a feigned smile. He isn't buying it. The discomfort I feel spilling through my veins seems to be reflected in his eyes. I need my head examined. What kind of girl visits a guy she barely knows, who is involved with someone and totally drunk.?

"Konnor! For God's sake." She bashes harder on the door.

He holds his hand out for me to take, but I wave him off dismissively and slowly follow him into the living room. I don't want to be touched right now. Konnor half-runs, half-stumbles to the door, and unlocks it. As Pembie barges in with a huff, Konnor lowers his head, his eyes meeting his feet. She halts when she sees me. Folding her arms across her chest, she rocks back on her heels, cocks her head, and scrutinizes me from head to toe.

"What's going on here, then?" she hisses.

"Blesk, was . . . dropping something off." Konnor gestures towards the envelope on his couch. He barely looks at her but he offers me an apologetic glance. I wish he hadn't because the backs of my eyes are stinging with the need to cry and I don't want him to see. *This was a huge mistake. He has a girlfriend. What was I thinking?*

She glowers at him, her eyes scrolling down his body, clearly disgusted by every crease in his clothes, by his messy hair. "You're drunk."

"Yep," he waves his hand indifferently. "What's new, hey?"

She leers at me before flashing me a patronising smile. She grabs the hem of her shirt and pulls it over her head. She isn't wearing a bra and I'm so shocked that my mouth drops open. I'm frozen in place, staring at her perfectly sculpted torso, muscular abdomen, tan skin, and breasts far too perfect to be real.

She throws the shirt at him. "Well if you're drunk, *lover*, I'll go on top." She winks at me. "Just the way he likes."

*I'm going to be sick.*

Konnor growls under his breath, rubs his temples, and grimaces at her provocative demeanour. *I need to get out of here.* An old enemy, *confrontation*, ruled my entire childhood, and I avoid it at all costs. I've had enough of it for two lifetimes. I couldn't move faster towards the door. Before I know it, I'm literally running to the elevator. I gasp for air. My stomach is twisted into knots. Tears are forcing themselves from my eyes as

I repeatedly hit the elevator button even though I know it won't make a shred of difference.

*I'm happy he's not alone. I'm happy they're together. She can look after him now. I'm happy about that. I'm really happy for them both.*

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Crossing my legs on the vinyl cushion in a corner of The Basement Lounge, I pretend to read the textbook I have open in front of me. I eagerly wait for my salad when my phone rings.

"Where are you?" Elise says through the phone.

I sniffle quietly. "At The Basement Lounge."

The Basement Lounge can only be accessed through an underground tunnel between the library and the bookshop, and for some reason that made me feel safe. Hidden. Booths and couches line the room's perimeter, and standard tables are scattered throughout the middle. The low ceiling appears to be carved from natural rock, the carpet is fire-engine red. For 1:30 on a Wednesday the restaurant is surprisingly busy. I sit alone with a Caesar salad on its way, torturing myself by thinking about what happened earlier.

"Wha... did... that... asshole do?" she asks breathlessly. Her voice comes in at different volumes, leading me to believe she's jogging.

"Nothing," I mumble, and flip another page over.

"Lie to Elise not," she pants in a funny Yoda voice.

I chuckle. "His girlfriend showed up and gave us a strip tease."

"What? You're kidding, right?"

"I wish I was," I sigh.

She laughs. "Oh, that sounds interesting. You should have called me. I have, like, a whole jar of ones I've been *dying* to get rid of." Her voice is muffled by those of passers-by.

I scoff. "My apologies. How thoughtless of me."

"I hate ones," she says in mock anger. "They're so obnoxious, because they are the weakest dollar, but still physically bigger than the twos... ones are bullies."

*This girl is crazy ... and I love it.*

"They are," I agree. "Imagine the attitude of the fifty-cent piece?"

“Oh, the nerve of the fifty... I tell ya.” She pauses. “Now, Blesk... you never told me he had a girlfriend.”

“Yeah, sort of.” I huff. “He said it isn’t serious.” I smack my forehead with my palm. “I know, I know. I’m an idiot.”

“Not you are. Softy you are. Suck boys do.”

I chuckle. “You’re soooo weird.”

“I’ll be there soon. Order me something vegetarian.” Then she hangs up, leaving me anxiously waiting for her arrival.

I’m so glad I have Elise in my life. I have a feeling she’s going to keep me sane... and also possibly make me a little insane, but in a good way. I stand up and wander over to the bar, leaning on it to look down into the kitchen. While I wait, I recognise someone in another booth. Jaxon. *Oh, no...* I hide my face with my hand, but just as I do his eyes pluck up with acknowledgement.

“B!” He waves, standing up quickly and strutting over to me.

I pretend to look pleased to see him. “Hi, Jaxon, nice to see you again.”

“Hey, you answered to B,” he laughs, leaning on the bar beside me, and grinning from ear to ear.

“It appears so. Are you guys always drinking? Or do you actually go to classes?” I ask, rolling my eyes.

The bartender literally slides over to us on the slippery floor. “This is the mini Bellamy, Shawn,” Jaxon introduces me, patting my back in the same fashion he might a male friend.

“Is this guy bothering you?” Shawn chuckles.

“I suppose that answers my question,” I mutter as the bartender and Jaxon share a smile.

Shawn smiles kindly at me. “Hi, mini-Bellamy, what can I get for you?”

“It’s Blesk, and can I please get a haloumi salad. And two,” I hesitate, “beers?”

*If you can’t beat ’em, join ’em.*

“Is that a question, or do you actually want a beer?” Shawn asks, with a grin.

“Yes, Little Creatures Pale, please.” I pick the local boutique beer to appear seasoned.

“Come sit with us?” Before I can decline his invitation, Jaxon says to Shawn “Put that on our table.” Jaxon seems decent today. His eyes don’t

wander and his attitude towards me seems to have overcome any sexist innuendos.

“Hey!” I hear a small voice come from behind me.

Before I know it, I’m engulfed in Elise’s arms. “Want me to cut him?” she whispers in my ear.

“God, I hope you’re joking,” I laugh, wrapping my arms around her in return, and squeezing lightly.

She chuckles. “Just a little maiming?”

Jaxon shuffles to our side, and as we release each other, he holds his hand out politely.

*Another handshake.*

“Hi, I’m Jaxon.”

Elise looks at him wide-eyed, and I brush a piece of hair from her alarmed face.

“Hi.”

*That’s it? Just hi?*

She is not quite her usual conversationalist when in the company of the more masculine gender.

“Come on, girls,” Jaxon pleads, wandering over and taking a seat at his booth. “You two are much nicer to look at than Drake.”

“Afraid of boys, Elise is!” I whisper in the same tone shed used with me earlier.

She adjusts her glasses and swallows nervously. “Not all boys, but the ones you seem to know look like they just walked out of a Hugo Boss magazine.”

I wrap my arm around her shoulder and walk with her over to Drake and Jaxon’s table. I enjoy touching someone I feel nothing but comfort with. Old squeamish thoughts surface as I think about the people in my life, and how very few I can actually say that about.

I swallow down the memories. “It’ll be okay. They’re just people, like you and me.”

“Like *you*, maybe,” she mutters softly, gawking at them.

“They don’t bite,” I whisper. For the first time since Elise arrived, I find myself thinking about Konnor and Pemberton and whatever it is they’re doing with each other—or to each other—right now.

“Hi, I’m Blesk,” I say, holding my hand out—because apparently university students shake hands—for the unfamiliar person to take. “This is

Elise.” Lovely dark eyes stare at me, and a little grin tugs at my lips as he takes my hand in his.

*Boys are okay, I guess.*

“Hi, Blesk,” his eyes are trained on mine, “I’m Drake.” In fact, he still hasn’t let go of my hand, and we are still staring at each other. My cheeks start to heat up and I pull my hand from his grasp, rubbing my palm on my dress, and watching as he offers his attention politely to Elise. “And, Elise, nice to meet you.”

“Drake, like, short for Dracula?” she says with a nervous chuckle. I laugh, and so does he. There must never be a dull moment inside Elise’s head.

“Sure, why not?” he says, flicking his eyes to me, and grinning again. His dark hair is pulled neatly back off his face, his high cheekbones are separated by a strong nose, and his jaw is lightly dusted with stubble. He’s very attractive. Elise is right. They do both look like they stepped out of a magazine.

“Whoa, don’t let Erik catch you two looking at each other like that. He’ll have a heart attack.” Jaxon laughs.

“Why, whatever do you mean, Jax?” Drake asks, without taking his gaze off me.

Elise and I sit opposite the two guys just as our beers come out, and I’m thankful for having something to do with my hands.

We spent the next hour debating, laughing and getting to know each other. We hit heads over intense topics, purposely, yet diplomatically, getting each other riled up. Apparently, university students live for that stuff. Drake, or Dracula, and I bonded over our views on Diaspora in Australia, and how it will even further shape future generations. Elise joined in, in prime Elise style, as soon as Jaxon argued that our biggest drain on the environment is the mining industry, in which she fired off some amazing facts about the damage the cattle industry is doing. Despite her compelling case, Jaxon isn’t about to give up meat for the environment anytime soon.

I enjoyed unleashing Elise on our two unsuspecting victims. At first, she’s all sweet and friendly, and then she morphs into this confident, sassy, little chick. All in all, we acted like friends, drinking, sharing opinions, and laughing, and I can’t really remember ever having anyone I felt comfortable enough to do that with. It was fun.

I look at my watch and see it's already 2: 20.pm. So I leave them still drinking to get to my first *Music and History 122* lecture. I ponder over how nice this feeling is, and why I resisted it for so long. I suppose I have Erik's popularity to thank for them.

And at least I was able to get my mind off Konnor. For a little while

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## SIX: Konnor

The right side of my bed is empty, the room is quiet, and there is only stillness. I'm alone. I was hoping she would be there, her hair spread across my pillow again and her body facing me with that impeccable concave at her waist. But no. I flip onto my back and stretch my arms above my head in an attempt to loosen my body. Agonising fatigue clutches my abdomen muscles, and I wish I could remember more about last night than just her hair and the way her body looked on my bed.

The sun's beams invade my senses. I spin over and squint at the alarm clock that mocks me on my bedside table. Ten a.m.

*Goddamn it.*

*I hate that clock.*

I roll myself off the bed and hit the floor with more force than intended. My muscles are clearly not awake yet. I'm glad I don't have practice today. I exhale forcefully as my head pounds, and I attempt my morning push-ups, focusing on my posture while ignoring images of her *fucking* hair. I keep my elbows tucked close to my body. I engage my core with each dip. My brain growls within my cranium. I keep going, fast and hard. Thinking about yesterday. Thinking about her leaving. Thinking about me doing nothing to stop her. Thinking about her sad face, and how this time it was *my* fault.

I grunt, trying to maintain a straight back on the decline, and locking everything in place. I pump out four sets of thirty reps, before slumping over onto my back and relaxing into a sigh. There was something there. Between us. Not just her hair, her eyes, her hands. I lie on my back, stare up at the ceiling and contemplate how much I let alcohol do the majority of the heavy-lifting for my actions. Yesterday was an exception. Yesterday was the anniversary of her death.

I hoist myself up and shuffle over to the kitchen bench. I flip my laptop open and log into the university's database to print off my class list and

timetables. I anxiously scan the list for her name and feel a quick rush of relief when I see the words: Blesk Bellamy.

At least I know I get one hour a week with her. Right, I need to get my shit together. I've given her the wrong impression of me.

After a shower, I stroll into my dressing room and put on my most presentable shirt and tie. It isn't until I stand in front of the mirror that I realise I don't know how to tie a tie because I've always had a girl to do it for me. I throw it to the side. Who needs a tie anyway? It's the twenty-first century. My brows knit as I stare at the hungover dickhead in the mirror. Who is that guy? How much of that boy is left in him? That boy the deceased little girl loved for all those years. Is there any of him still in there? Her very existence made him worth loving. All I see now is a drunk, arrogant arsehole. I turn from my own reflection with a scowl and wander towards my desk.

As I'm packing up my case filled with today's course material, I see an envelope with beautiful cursive writing on the front, that reads: *Corny Konnor*.

*Corny Konnor,  
Thank you for the gift  
You are very #  
Now I feel I harmoni -can.  
Blesk*

A colossal smile stretches across my face and I laugh. She's terrible at puns. I fucking *love* that she's terrible at puns. She must have been happy when she wrote this, excited even. Excited to see me. *I fucked this all up.*

I wish I'd chased after her, but if I remember correctly, even standing was problematic at that point. We could have stayed lying on my bed, hardly touching all night, and it would have been the best night of my life. I don't care that I barely know her, that she knocks me off my tracks, that Erik wants to kick my arse ... I just want to be around her.

\*\*\*

As the elevator opens onto the ground, I stride out, making my way across the lobby to Adolf.

“Looking sharp today, Mr Slater,” Adolph says, nodding once with approval.

I raise my hands as I ask, “What were you thinking letting Pemberton up yesterday?”

“Mr Slater, she is on the list,” he says, his eyes slowly widening. “She doesn’t need to ask.”

“Well, *damn it*, take her off.”

“Of course, sir!” He wanders over to his desk, and lowers his head, typing into his computer.

*You’re being a dick, Konnor.*

“I’m sorry, Adolf. I’m pretty hungover today,” I admit, approaching him and smiling graciously.

“It is fine, Mr Slater. Pemberton Wright has now been taken off your authorised guest list.” He nods at me kindly.

“Was Blesk okay? Miss Bellamy, I mean, when she came down yesterday?” I’m not sure that I want to know the answer, but the words came out anyway.

Adolf looks regretfully at me, and my heart sinks. “She was crying, sir.”

I wish I could punch myself. I wish I could kick the arse of the guy who made her cry. Me. “Dammit.”

*Fuck, Konnor. You’re an asshole.*

I pat Adolf on the shoulder and force a smile. “Thank you, Adolf.”

As I walk towards the sliding doors, he yells out to me, “Mr Slater!” I spin to face him again. “Would you like me to put Miss Bellamy on the guest list?”

I raise my eyebrows. “Aren’t we optimistic?”

A wise sort of smile crosses his face. “Girls don’t cry like that for no reason, sir. They only cry when something important happens, or someone important does something to them.”

I exhale loudly, and a grin tugs at my lips. “Yes, Adolf, put Miss Bellamy on my list.” Because he’s right. Girls don’t cry like that for no reason, and since those tears were because of me, it’s my responsibility to make sure they never are again.

I begin to stride towards the exit once more, but halt abruptly and face him. “Hey!” I call out across the lobby. “What did you think of her?”

He smiles and for a moment I see a young man thinking about a girl.  
“Beautiful, Mr Slater. Inside and out, I would wager.”  
*I couldn't agree more, Adolf.*

\*\*\*

I wander to class, each hand clutching a case filled with all my course material.

*Do I pull her aside and chat with her?*

*Wait until after class?*

*Am I going to come off as desperate?*

*I am bloody desperate.*

As I round the corner of Block F, I see Blesk sitting with Jax and Drake. My chest tightens. It surprises me how the mere sight of her makes me feel. I love the clothes she wears. Flattering but humble. Very different from Pemberton's wardrobe selection. She's wearing black leggings with a white lace shirt-dress. Her golden hair is pulled off her face in a high ponytail that bounces whenever she moves her head. I love how her hair bounces like that. I love that she's wearing flats, not heels. I love that she clearly doesn't wear much makeup. Blesk is my brand of perfection.

As I near them, my stomach lurches at how closely Drake is sitting to her. Unable to tame my expression, I glare at them, tightening my jaw. They are almost touching. *Almost.*

I like Drake, though. He's a good guy. We've known each other since high school, and when we matriculated here together, we shared a dorm for nearly two years. He's practically family.

*I fucking hate Drake right now.*

*I tense up when she laughs at him...*

*He's making her laugh.*

My knees feel weak when I see that smile, wrinkling the corners of her eyes and reddening her cheeks. She sticks her tongue out slightly with each bright expression, and I can hardly handle how that makes me feel. My heart pounds. As she giggles her head flies back, her shoulders shake and her ponytail bounces around. I want to capture that moment forever. So now I find myself smiling, grinning like a bloody moron, at this girl laughing

with some other guy. Her happiness makes me happy, even though it has nothing to do with me.

My gaze falls straight to Jax. “What up? You’re not hassling my students, are you?” I laugh, giving Blesk a charming smile. She blushes slightly and lowers her head evasively. I don’t like that. She blushed... Why did she do that? Because of me? Because she likes Drake?

“Oh, no, B, do you have this dickhead as your tutor?” Jax rolls his head back, wearing a shit-eating grin. “Well, you are soooo lucky I know him—I’ll make sure you get off easy.”

“I’m sure she won’t need any help. Blesk’s a smart cookie,” Drake says, knocking his elbow into hers. He stares at her, like they share a secret, and I hate that.

“Mr Slater knows not to treat me any different,” she says, still avoiding my gaze.

*Mr Slater?*

“*Mr Slater,*” Jax taunts.

Drake glances at me. “So, *Mr. Slater*, we’re still on for tomorrow night, right? I’m gonna kick. Your. Arse.”

Friday night is poker night, and I usually lose. I completely ignore his comment.

I swallow hard. “Seriously, Blesk, just call me Konnor, okay?” I dip my head, trying to get her to actually acknowledge me. Her eyes drift everywhere other than to my face, and her smile tightens slightly.

“Slater?” Drake says louder, eager for my attention. When I dart my eyes to him and receive a suggestive wiggly brow, I become well-aware of his intentions. We have known each other far too long to not know when the other is looking to hook up. He juts his chin out at me and nods towards Blesk, in a ‘*game on*’ kind of gesture. I feel like knocking him out. Blesk’s not a game.

Drake passes Blesk her bag, then tucks a piece of hair behind her ear. “See you at six, okay? I’ll pick you up outside your dorm.”

*Why did he have her bag?*

*What the hell is going on?*

“Okay,” she mutters, her cheeks pinkening. He made her flushed. She’s blushing because of him.

I grit my teeth and turn to Jax. “So how do you all know each other, exactly?”

*Real subtle.*

“We bumped into B at The Basement Lounge, yesterday. Had a few bevy.”

“Right, well, B needs to get to class now,” I state very matter-of-factly.

*Acting like a dickhead again.*

“Right-o, see ya, Mr Slater.” Jax sniggers as he walks away, calling back over his shoulder, “Catch ya soon, B.”

Drake meanders off, but turns around, and walks back to Blesk. He casts me a furtive glance to make sure I’m watching before he reaches her. Then... he kisses her on the cheek. “Later, Blesk.”

*On her fucking cheek.*

I feel my back tighten between my shoulders, and I think I unintentionally growl. Blesk looks stunned. Her eyes widen when his lips touch her skin, and then, for the first time today, she looks straight at me. My cheek muscles dance beneath my skin. I open my mouth while our eyes are locked hard on each other, but before I can speak, a sea of other students washes between us, and surges into the classroom.

*He kissed her, but she looked at me. Her eyes went to me.*

*She likes me.*

I inhale a big breath, and then exhale it slowly, calming myself. I nod at her and trail my students into the class room where I meander to the front and place my cases on the desk.

My heart pounds in my chest so I shuffle papers around before trying to speak. When I look up and search the room, everyone is pulling chairs out from the stacks and placing them around in front of me. It is small class; 17 students. It’s apparent some of them know each other, and some don’t know anyone. Blesk is in the latter.

Whether it’s an instinct based on my own personality or not, I’m not sure, but I can pick out the players straight away.

A few of the boys have positioned themselves beside her, and she offers them a shy girlie half-smile.

I want to tell her that won’t help.

I can’t exactly blame them for noticing her. She is gorgeous, unassumingly so.

“Right-o,” I say as chairs are still being shuffled around. “My friends call me Slater.” All eyes are on me as the students’ movements have almost

completely ceased. “So, you can call me Konnor.” I hear a mixture of masculine chortles and sweet giggles.

*Time for my ice breaker.*

“Firstly,” I can’t help but chuckle as the next sentence leaves my lips, “who in this room wants to sleep with someone else in this room?” The girls erupt into fits of giggles, and the guys glance awkwardly at each other “Raise your hand if you want to have sex with someone in this room?” I say. No one moves.

“Okay, okay, you don’t need to tell me who, but have a good look around and then raise your hand.” I wait patiently while they look around at each other, but no one raises their hand. “Does this help?” I ask, raising my own hand. More girly giggles fill the room.

*No, not you.*

Most of the boys and a few of the girls raise their hands. Blesk does as well.

*Daring... that hand best be for me.*

“So about 80 percent of you want to have sex with someone in this room.” I pinch my thumb and index finger together, pretending to hold an invisible pin. “Now do me a favour; put a pin in that feeling. I know what first-year university is like. Put a pin in it, at least until after class.” They all laugh now, including Blesk. And now I’m smiling like a Cheshire cat, cause I made her laugh.

“I’m a cruisey guy. I am just here to guide you. The idea of this class is to teach you how to teach your passion—*music*—to kids.” I pace back and forth in front of them, finding it easier to talk when I’m on the move.

“One of the most important things to remember about this class is that I’m not a music major. You probably know more than I do about general music theory. I’m here to help you work through what your lecturer wants you to know. She teaches.” I halt in the centre of the room and smirk. “I’m just a peer with the answers to your tests.”

Everyone chuckles again. When they quiet down, I begin to wander in front of them. “This class is more about *teaching* music to students than about music itself.” I grab a pile of unit outlines from my desk, and hand them to the students in the front row.

“Pass them back. I know some of you will have taken the initiative and printed this out prior. Some of you are lazy, and some of you don’t have

printers. I don't know who fits into which category... yet. But I will soon." More chuckles.

"Konnor?" I hear a guy call out.

I nod at him. "Yep?"

"Do you mark the assignments or does Mrs Kale?"

I laugh. "Are you trying to figure out how much you need to suck up to me?" Then I watch as he gazes around the room while other students snicker, and a low glow touches his cheeks.

"Maybe," he says honestly.

I address the class as if the question were universal. "Your assignments and tests are all distributed randomly among three grad students, including me and Mrs Kale. I turn my attention back to the student who asked the question. "To answer you, possibly. And . . . you'll never know."

For the next twenty minutes I review the course outline, what is expected, and how the marks are broken up. My students are varied in age and demeanour, but most of them seem eager and interested in what I have to say. Teaching is my absolute life. I want them all to succeed.

When I ask the class to get into four groups by dividing the room into quadrants with my hands. I can't help but put Blesk with the two lads I noticed eyeing her. I give them a task; as a team, I ask them to tell me what they want to get out of this class. I promise them I will try to make it happen. Blesk is sitting with her long voluptuous legs crossed elegantly in front of her, rocking her leg back and forth, and clicking her pen. The thickness of her thigh on top is perfect, and I swallow hard, imagining my hand gripping her soft skin and feeling tiny goose bumps break out because she wants me to touch her as much as I want to. I meander over to her group, and all three of them stare up at me as I approach.

"Hey," I say, offering my hand for one of the lads to shake, "Konnor."

He takes it with a smug look and shakes it. "Hi, Konnor. Matt."

And then I hold my hand out for *treble-maker number two*. "Konnor."

"Justin." He takes my hand, grinning at me.

"Miss Bellamy," I say, looking straight at her half-startled, half-smiling face. "Do you mind if I pull you away for a moment?"

She bats those long lashes at me for several seconds, "Ah, yes of course."

I wave my hand towards the door. She stands and flattens her shirt-dress down her stomach before preceding me out of the room. Both boys ogle her



flawless arse as she walks away, so I purposely catch their line-of-sight, lifting my brow at them knowingly. They shift their gaze around the room, their eyes feigning innocence.

*I get it. She does have a spectacular arse.*

“Did you just pull rank on me for personal reasons, *Mr Slater?*” she says through a forced smile once I close the door and block us from any prying eyes.

“Blesk, I’m so sorry.” The words just tumble out.

Her expression falls slightly.

She talks through a tight sad smile, “Konnor, you don’t owe me anyth  
—”

“I told her to leave,” I interrupt in a desperate tone I barely recognise. “I told her it’s over.”

When Blesk’s mouth opens, and she seems to hesitate, I can’t help but like her more. Pemberton always has some vicious retort.

“I’m sorry,” I repeat. “I just want you to know, that isn’t me, not normally. That’s a weird day for me and I drank a lot more than I usually do.”

“Konnor,” her eyes narrow as she tries to smile, genuinely this time. “It’s okay, thank you, but it’s okay.” I put my hand on her waist and move her until her back meets the brick wall. Both cheeks redden. She looks shocked or excited, or perhaps both.

I put both palms flat on the wall next to her head, caging her in front of me. I lean down so I can stare her straight in the eyes.

“Where are you going with Drake tonight?” Her lips part and she’s sucking extra air in. Her chest rises and falls with more need. My eyes dart to her mouth to watch her tongue run along her lower lip, and I’m overwhelmed with the urge to taste that lip and that tongue.

“We’re just friends,” she finally says, snapping me out of my illusion, “going for a drink.”

I shake my head with a smirk. “He doesn’t want to be *just* friends.”

Her chin tucks into her neck slightly, and her eyes peer up at me, so shy, so demure, so *fucking* perfect. “And why does that matter to you? You had a girlfriend up until a few hours ago,” she breathes.

I lean my mouth down to brush her ear, and I inhale deeper when I smell her.

*Peaches.*

Her shoulder rolls when my breath hits her neck, and I absolutely love how flustered she is. "It matters, Blesk."

Silence fills the space between us, and it's anything but comfortable because my heart is racing, and I can see the flutter of her pulse beneath her skin. I wish there was no space between us at all. I wish my lips were on hers. I wish I could feel her breasts pushed against my chest. I wish I could taste her tongue. I'm only inches from her, but those inches are the difference between me and her... and *us*.

I wonder what she's thinking. Her hands are flat against the wall by her thighs, desperately gripping the bricks. Her cheeks flush, and the skin on her throat prickles as my breath rushes down her chest. Before I can stop myself, I'm pressing my mouth to her neck, feeling her heart throbbing against my lips, a moan vibrating in her throat, her body pressing into me... *Fuck*. She is just as responsive to me as I am to her.

I force myself away from her. "Fuck." We stare at each other, astonished by what just happened.

Clearing my throat, and taking a few calming breathes, I try to ignore a certain appendage that is now twitching in my pants. "Don't go tonight," I say breathlessly. "Hang out with me instead."

She exhales, and her hands flex around the bricks at her side. "Okay."

I lift a brow at her. "Really?"

Her shoulders shake gently as she giggles, "Yes. Really."

"Well okay then. Ummm, Can you go in first." I wave her in with a grin. "I need a few minutes."

Her tongue peaks out between her lips and she laughs.

*That tongue isn't helping, Blesk.*

At the end of class, I collect each group's activity sheets for Cathy Kale to review. While I continue completing my menial tasks, I think about Blesk's neck, her soft skin, her physical reaction to my lips on her throat. Her moan. How she rocked into me... *Damn*.

*Calm down.*

*Think of something else...*

I pack everything away and lock up, just as my phone buzzes inside my pocket. I grab it out and swipe to see the sender. *Pemberton*.

'Konnor, I'm sooo sorry please cum and see me. I'm not doing good.'

Her spelling is not lost on me. Ordinarily I'd hightail it over to see her, but I know her games. Pemberton uses sex as a way to command men, and

for the most part, it works. She's a damn drama queen, and I know if I go over there to check on her, she'll be downing wine, and sobbing relentlessly. Then she'll say or do something to get me riled up and start the kind of fight I can't just walk away from. Blesk's face is the only one I want to see. I ignore Pemberton's text, drop off the paperwork in Cathy's pigeonhole, and make my way to Blesk's dorm.

I scruff up my hair and untuck my shirt in an attempt to make myself look less formal. The sun is beginning its descent toward the horizon, filling the sky with pinks and oranges. I wonder what Blesk's favourite colour is. I wonder if she like sunsets...most girls do.

Lucky for me, I catch Drake in the quadrangle. "Dude," I say.

"Slater, so how'd my girl go on her first day?" He smirks, provoking me.

I laugh. "Desperate Drake, it isn't happening. This one's not a game."

He gives me the kind of grin that makes me want to cave his face in with my knuckles. "And what makes you think she wants what you have to offer?"

"She does." I rattle that response out, feeling like crap for talking about her like that. "But it isn't like that."

"Pussy. What about Pemberton?" he asks.

"It's over," I state, expressionless. "That's how much I need you to back off, Drake."

He guffaws. "What does she have, bourbon-flavoured nipples or something?"

*Right, because I'm an alcoholic... very clever, Drake, you bastard.*

I'm extremely glad both my hands are tightly clutching cases or his face would be taking on a new shape. I shake my head at him warningly and fantasise about jabbing a case into his throat.

He smirks at me. "Can't guarantee she won't come to me."

"I can *guarantee* she won't," I hiss.

He huffs. "Whoa, you work fast. Can't keep up with you."

I have nothing to say to that. I heave myself away.

"Slater!" He yells at my back. "Konnor! Seriously, what's going on? Of course I'll back off! Why are you acting like this?"

*I don't even know myself.*

\*\*\*

Blesk is in a girl's-only dorm, one of the last original dormitories on campus, small and only borderline legally sufficient in amenities. In saying that, the girl-only-tenant-rule gets my tick of approval. I approach room seventy-three and knock before adjusting my shirt, running my hands through my hair, and rolling my shoulders loose. The door swings open and a set of stern blue eyes hit me. A petite brunette stare at me in the same fashion someone who knows all my secrets might, and I feel immediately apprehensive.

Her eyes are so wide they almost pop out of her face. "Hey," I say with a nod.

"Konnor?" She tilts her head. She steps back, and stares at me, her eyes scan every inch of me. I can't help but laugh, hold my arms out to the side, and smirk while I do a little spin.

"All in check?" I ask, gesturing to myself. "Do I pass?"

She brightens. "Blesk," she calls out. "Konnor's here."

"Hi, I'm Elise," she waves at me, flapping her wrist awkwardly. I get the impression I make her nervous.

"Elise, pleasure is all mine, "I say, slapping on the charm. I stick both hands in my pockets and rock back and forth on my heels waiting to see Blesk. Then a vision-in-red steps out from behind Elise. Blesk smiles at me from under a little black side beanie, and my heart stops. Everything about her body says she is one of a kind: the way she holds it, the way she dresses it, and the way she clearly respects it. She has a regal sort of elegance, like a duchess.

Her blonde hair is swept to the side and dangles down her torso, splaying over her breasts. She twists from side to side, and as she does the hem of her red dress sways across her knees, making her look too sweet to be real. Even if I could design my perfect girl, Blesk would be superior in every possible way. She isn't going to be happy about getting that dress dirty, though, but I can't wait to see it stained. Little does she know. Elise is staring at me while I'm staring at Blesk, who is eyeing me from head to heel.

*Is she checking me out?*

“Blesk is my new best friend, Konnor,” Elise says to me, narrowing her eyes. “If you hurt her, I will beat you over the head with your own leg.” Not expecting that, I nearly choke on my laughter.

*Fair enough.*

I grin at her. “Which leg? Because I have a favourite.”

She peers down at my legs, pretending to take my question seriously. “Your right one,” she says, pointing and smiling with glee.

I tilt my head at her and give her a questioning smile. “Dammit. How did you know?”

Blesk seems different tonight. Comfortable. Confident. I’m in awe of the expression on her face. Did Elise cause that?

“Elise?” I turn my gaze to Blesk’s new best friend. “Would you like to join us?”

Her eyes widen, and she glances at Blesk.

“Oh, yes!” Blesk blurts out, knocking Elise with her elbow. “It’ll be fun.”

Elise stares down at her clothes, and motions towards them. “I just have jeans on.”

“Oh, you don’t need anything nice on for where we’re going,” I say. “But if you need a few moments, I can wait.” I turn to Blesk and act like a complete moron again by saying, “I’m a pretty patient guy. I’ve waited a long time for her.”

*Are you even still a man, Konnor?*

Elise turns to Blesk, who is now blushing from her cheeks to her ears, and says, “I’m not sure whether to say, ‘aww or throw up.’”

“That is *really* corny, Konnor.” Blesk giggles. And once again my heart skips a beat.

“So I’ve been told.”

\*\*\*

All I want to do is hold her hand, to thread my fingers through hers, to feel her palm pressed against mine, and to mimic the rhythm of her stride as she walks. But I’m trying to be fair to Elise. Anyone who has managed to put that skip in Blesk’s step has my seal of approval.

As we walk into the Arts & Grey Theatre, I hold the door open for both girls and wait for Blesk to pass me. I follow her and discreetly place my hand on her waist, steering her down the corridor. I just had to touch her. The theatre is at the east wing of campus and opens every night, which often means it has a non-existent audience. It's really what university is all about—run by students, for students. Anything goes. The shows vary from poetry, dancing, singing, live art, and hour-long monologues that usually end in at least one performer committing suicide.

And the audience wanting to.

The whole experience is pretty casual. Mismatched chairs, recliners, couches, and park benches make up the seating arrangement. The stage is barely six metres long, and only slightly raised. I'm not an artsy guy. Not really. But I shared a few electives with some of the art students, and with Frank, the theatre manager. He's pretty good value. The lighting is coordinated by a guy named Jojo, and I have it on good authority that most of the time he's up on the stage truss getting stoned. I love this place. I hope Blesk does, too.

We approach the front three-seater couch, and I take my place in one corner while Blesk slides in next to me, followed closely by Elise. Blesk folds her dress delicately under her as she sits, making me squirm slightly. She's just so damn feminine. Resting my arm on the head rest, I allow her to set the pace, and hope she moves into me. I want her to, *of course*. With little hesitation, she slides her shoulder under my arm. When I pull her in closer, she shuffles over willingly. We are a perfect fit. I peer over to check on Miss Elise, who is closely tucked up beside Blesk, and eagerly peering around.

I lean towards them. "This is one of my favourite places to go on campus," I whisper because the lights are beginning to dim. "You'll see some wild stuff here."

Elise pushes her glasses back onto the arch of her nose, and tries to take it all in. "It's funky, I like that."

"Dickhead!" I hear someone say inappropriately loud, and then feel the back of my seat shake. I release Blesk, and pull my arm down to my side, spinning around to see Jax and Drake grinning at us. Bunch of bloody miscreants. I wonder what Blesk said to Drake when she cancelled their plans. His lopsided grin tells me he's not surprised to see us here. He winks at me, letting me know we're all right.

“I thought you’d be here, dickhead,” Jax laughs.

I hold my finger up to my lips and shush them. “Sit down and shut up.”

When Elise sees them, she squirms with anticipation in her seat. “Dracula!” Elise acknowledges Drake enthusiastically.

*So, they know each other.*

*I must have missed something.*

“Hey, *Dracula!*” I mock with a cocky smirk. “Sit down you ugly, blood-sucking bastard.”

Drake scoffs at me. “Fuck off. Dracula is a stud.”

When I turn to Blesk she is peering at me with little flashes of disappointment, perhaps in response to me pulling away from her so quickly in the presence of the lads. Before I know it, I wrap my arm over her shoulder again. I hang it down her side, my fingers brushing the curve at her waist and down her hip, causing her to wriggle beneath my touch. *Jesus Christ ...* I can’t help imagining her wriggle underneath me.

My need to focus on functional processes, like breathing and maintaining an appropriate level of arousal, is imperative right now. The boys jump into the seats at our sides just as Frank walks on stage, followed closely by the spotlight that isn’t in the right spot. Bloody Jojo.

Everyone goes quiet. All I can feel right now is Blesk, her chest rising as she leans against me, her hair brushing the side of my neck. I subtly turn my head and watch as her eyes dart around the stage in anticipation of something to happen. She relaxes into a sig, and presses against me—I have never felt more content.

“How long have you known, Elise?” I whisper in her ear.

“As long as I’ve known you,” she whispers back.

I chuckle. Some things just work. Elise and Blesk just work ... and so do Blesk and I.

I start to say something else, just as Frank speaks.

“Welcome. Tonight, we are going to show you what live art is all about. When you go to a gallery, the items you view have been constructed, nay, designed, over a period of time. The place of said production is unknown. The state of said producer is also unknown. Its living essence, unknown.”

*Artsy guys are so dramatic.*

Frank continues. “The painting you fell in love with could have been painted under any circumstance, in any mood, during any event. What does it mean to them? Only words. What they tell you it means. So how can it

mean so much to you? The first step your daughter takes, mum fighting back tears, dad with his arms outstretched to catch her. Wouldn't it be nice if you could capture a piece of *life*, perfectly *in time* and *in space*? Well, that's the beauty of live art; the piece or experience happens right in front of you. We are bridging the gap between the art and the consumer."

With that, Frank calls a young couple up on stage. He stretches up and pulls a board with a piece of canvas attached to it towards the floor.

"I'm going to paint them as they are right now. In love."

Jax and Drake splutter out a laugh and I almost follow suit until I notice Blesk and Elise, wide-eyed and enthralled. These girls are making me soft. Blesk chews on her bottom lip as her attention is glued on Frank. She is completely in love with this.

Frank turns back to the audience. "Watch this."

He positions the couple in front of the canvas, then begins to spray paint around them. It's messier than I'd expected. He coats the canvas, moves the couple as if they were puppets, and starts spraying them again. They are basically living stencils. Within minutes they're completely covered in paint and chuckling happily together. Everyone around me is smiling while they're watching this unfold, and I'm grateful that it's exactly what I wanted it to be.

We watch for fifteen minutes as a blank canvas becomes an abstract piece of artwork. Frank slides his work of art behind the curtain, and it disappears backstage so that once again there is a blank backdrop.

"That looks like what it felt like to watch," Blesk whispers in my ear, and then giggles. "You know what I mean."

*And I'm a goner.*

I'm grinning at her because that giggle resonates in my chest every damn time. "Yeah, I know what you mean."

"Oi, Slater!" Frank yells out into the audience, peering around until his eyes find me. "Nice to see you, buddy, who's that next to you?"

I acknowledge him with a nod. "A pretty girl, ever seen one before?"

"Cheeky prick. Get up here, it's your turn," he says, dragging a new piece of canvas down. *Christ, it must be at least four metres long.* I turn to look at Blesk and she's white, completely stunned, like a bunny in headlights. A damn adorable bunny.

"Everyone up!" I say, standing. Elise just blinks at me with her mouth open. Drake and Jax are eagerly jumping to the challenge, encouraging the



girls to join them.

Originally, I'd planned on this being for just Blesk and me on our first date. But I'm glad it'll be a group moment. After the lads jump up, I reach down to grab Blesk who seems to sink back into the seat.

"Blesk," I say, and pull her into me. "Let's do this?" I nod at her, encouraging her with my playful eyes to agree. "Yeah? You'll have fun, I promise."

My hand moves to the small of her back as I steady her against me, noticing her breathing quicken. Her eyes close tightly as she takes a big calming breath, and I'm suddenly not sure I should have done this. She is so shy. I thought that because she sings in public she'd enjoy this. "You'll regret it if you don't," I whisper.

During our private moment, Jax has pulled Elise up on stage, and holds their hands above their heads, while people in the audience clap.

"See, look," I say, pointing to Elise whose grin stretches from ear to ear.

A nervous smile tugs at Blesk's lips. "O ...kay," she says in a silly, defeated voice, rolling her eyes at me.

I hope I get to hear that cute voice again. It was like she was mocking me, and maybe herself, but either way, I loved it. I pick her up before I step onto the stage, and she squeals with excitement. Frank begins to position us in front of the canvas. Blesk and I remain in the same place, with her cradled in my arms. She cuddles my neck, and her nervousness is apparent by the pace of her heart as it beats against me. I rock her back and forth until she relaxes, giggles slightly, and begins to kick her feet. And of course, I once again have a ridiculous grin on my face watching her, just ... being *her*. I make sure I have her dress folded across my forearm, so no one can catch a glimpse of her knickers. Although I'd love to know what colour they are, whether they're lacy, or silk, or cotton, or boy shorts ...

Clearing my throat, I force myself to forget about her underwear. This would be a very bad moment to get a boner. Captured forever. The thought actually makes me laugh.

Elise is standing on my right covering her heart with her palm, and Frank says that represents "in life." Jax is on my left pretending to look at his watch, which is meant to be "in time". Drake is on my far left looking up towards the ceiling. "In space." The whole thing is ridiculous and yet the girls seem to enjoy it.

We are all trying to not misrepresent our designated poses, although it is particularly difficult when Blesk is kicking around and laughing nervously. Which I wouldn't change for the world. Jax keeps grabbing Blesk's feet, trying to hold them stationary, which only makes her giggle and kick more. Frank doesn't seem to mind as he gets in the zone and begins to spray us with paint, switching colours, coating us and the canvas, splashing up and down, switching motions and consistencies.

I hold Blesk for nearly twenty-five minutes while Frank scurries around us, and the whole time I can't take my eyes off her lips. I want to kiss her. I'm dying to taste her. I want our first kiss captured right now. Despite how much I want to, a strange apprehension stops me.

Frank puts the canvas away for drying and sealing. Apparently it will look completely different after it sets. When I finally lower Blesk to the ground, I thread my fingers through hers and we leave the theatre hand-in-hand. We approach the dorm, and before the girls venture inside and we all say our undesirable goodbyes for the night, I need a second alone with Blesk. I walk her into the dormitory courtyard, and into a softly lite corner. She shivers as the cold wind hits us, caught between both buildings and the rustling trees around. Rubbing her shoulders to keep her warm, I struggle not to stare.

She's covered in paint— it's in her hair, on her hands, on her cheek. She's marked with the uniqueness of this night, and I knew she'd get her dress all dirty but she doesn't seem to care at all. I grab her hand, while looking her straight in the eye, wishing I had something impressive or sweet to say to her. Or something corny. I gently push her back, until she is wedged between me and the wall. Her back hits the wall, and a small gasp leaves her lips.

*Goddamn, those lips.*

My breathing nearly stops when I smell her again, and as she licks her lips I almost lean in and kiss her. I love how her hand feels in mine, how her pulse drums against my palm. I raise our combined hands and open hers, stroking my fingers down her hand and gazing into her eyes, enjoying how she gazes back. A huge grin draws my lips out, and I press our index fingers together in a gesture I haven't done in so many years.

Her face falls, and something unexpected and heavy drops into my stomach. She gasps, retracting her hand from me so quickly I could have sworn I burnt her.

“What is it, Blesk?” I squint at her, questioningly. Her face pales, her cheeks hollow, every part of her appears paralysed, and the look in her eyes... *Christ, the look in her eyes is freaking out.*

*What did I do?*

“What did I do?” I finally say.

She’s petrified and staring at me, searching every inch of my face, as if she sees something disturbing in me—my secrets.

“Blesk, what is it? Tell me what I did! Please? You’re fucking freaking me out right now.”

*What the hell is happening?*

She looks like she’s just seen a ghost.

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SEVEN: August 23, 1999

*DISTRICT DAILY NEWS*

*Nerrock Family Son and Heir Kidnapped at  
Daybreak*

Sunday August 22, Deakon Nerrock, age 5, was taken from his family home just outside Cape Rogue. The brown-haired, green-eyed only son of Dustin and Madeline Nerrock and heir to the prominent family's estate was tucked into bed Saturday 21 and was missing at 5:30 the next morning.

Constable Hugo Toshal of Cape Rogan City Police and a party of eight officers were called out to the family home by the Nerrock family's Captain of Security Adolf Bauer when Madeline discovered the boy was missing. Mr Bauer started his shift at 9:00 pm and was accompanied by his usual team of four trained bodyguards.

Mr Bauer said the popular student of West Wing Early Education Centre is lively but very close to his mother and has never run away from home.

He said, "He (Deakon) was put to bed at 7:00 pm and both my deputy and I checked on him just after midnight; he was fast asleep in bed at that time.

"As far as we are aware, no one went in the house, and no-one left—the security system was still engaged when we realised the boy was missing," Mr Bauer said.

Constable Toshal said that a 5-kilometre radius around the family mansion was searched by volunteers, security, and police, and no trace of the boy was found.

“We have search parties out and several people are being questioned however, at this stage, we have no suspects,” Constable Toshal said.

Madeline Nerrock spoke emotionally to Cape Rogan News Group and thanked the volunteers and police for their efforts so far.

“I want to say, please, if anyone knows anything, you will be generously rewarded for your information. And if you took my son, please bring him back to us—we will do anything to have him back,” Mrs. Nerrock said.

Deakon Nerrock is three feet five inches and was last seen wearing a red Spiderman shirt and black cotton pants. Contact the Cape Rogan City Police if you have seen Deakon Nerrock or have any information about his whereabouts. A generous reward is on offer for any information that leads to his discovery.

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## EIGHT: Blesk

“Where. Are. You?” Erik screams into the phone. I know he’s frantic because each word comes out between gasps. I’m having trouble constructing thoughts, let alone converting them into words. I mumble, and my mouth fills with tears. I can’t believe I’m here, again. I can’t believe I’m making my brother endure my shadowy past, again.

The last seven hours have been a blur of traffic, of running, of hiding. I’m always hiding from my past, and now I’m walking, covered in splatters of paint, my hair knotted with acrylic, and my flats barely adequate for their general purpose, let alone trekking a mile through an uphill field below clapping trees, sinking into the undisturbed ground and ruining the purity beneath. Water seeps through the soles, and the daisies and weeds sponge my landing as I walk out on top of the hill.

*The hill I hate.*

I squint at the sun. I’d forgotten how bright it is up here. My feet are soaking wet with soppy condensation, and I’m shivering in the crisp morning air. But the beauty of this part of Australia takes my breath away, just like it always has. I’m not me when I’m on *this* particular hill.

*I’m not me right now.*

The view from the top still fills my chest, just as the wave of daisies that takes the ground by storm have always done. I was constantly told that daisies are little more than weeds, and that they’d be ploughed into the ground to make way for more important foliage. I never cared; I don’t care. I love daisies.

“I’m home,” I manage to say to Erik when I remember I’m on the phone. When the words break from my lips, I am left panting down the speaker. I caught a bus. A train. Another bus. I went home. I didn’t really think it through. I wheeze for a few seconds as my body forgets how to breathe and how to swallow. There is no response. “I went home,” I

whisper again, kneeling on the spot, the spot that marks the entrance to a place only a few people could ever find . . . or have ever been.

“Just stay where you are,” Erik says curtly, pain clear in his voice. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.” I lower the phone from my ear. I’m knotted up with all kinds of delirious feelings. I stare at the lifeless space below my feet, a clear patch of grass that leads down the stairs. “Blesk!” he yells.

I raise the handset back in a daze. “Yes?”

“Do *NOT* go in,” he commands before he disconnects.

I hate that Erik is coming back here. I know what seeing this place does to him. Saying goodbye to Liz was one of the hardest days of both of our lives. I was nine years old, Erik was only thirteen, when they brought us here. My brother, my mother, and my dad all spent a spring day on the hill. We picked the daisies that she loved so much, and we lay them by her tree, where we buried her memory forever. Leaving her behind meant leaving *him* behind, too, and everything they were together. But I needed the grief to end.

The year before we said goodbye felt like hell on earth, and no one could get through to me. I would dream every night, the same dream, which made it easy to remember.

I’m watching television when suddenly I see his face. I see his face, people crying, a mother crying, and then I know—know I’ve ruined his life. His four-year-old face.

I would then be shaken back to the waking world still screaming, swamped with the guilt his eyes summoned in me. Erik would wake me from the deepest place within my subconscious and hold me while I wept, while I tried to remind myself that it was over, that I could let go. He would curl up beside me, smothering me in his arms, rocking me back and forth and hushing me tenderly. His heart would always race. His cheeks were often wet with his own sorrow. My mother couldn’t sleep, my father couldn’t sleep, my brother wouldn’t sleep, and I was to blame for their misery.

That’s why I did it. When I decided to end it all, to *finally* end it all, the decision lightened me. Every second of my life, I’d somehow managed to lead people down the path of horror, and I was too selfish to release them from their torment by freeing them of me. I wanted to die. I only wished I’d had the courage to do it earlier. When the blood drained from the sliced vein in my thigh and coloured the bath water pink, it felt like all my guilt was

seeping from me, all my pain, all my emotions, were unlocked and free. Then, the thudding started to vibrate in my cranium, a pounding cadence that bellowed throughout my head and in my arteries. Bashing, droning, faster, beating, until the noise was so loud it became one drowning hum.

The wall-to-ceiling tiles opposite me began to change form, warping with my slipping consciousness. I was slipping. The first sense to go was sight. Then the water became so cold, so icy, that it froze me, and I went numb, numb from the neck down. The second sense to go was touch. The air thickened; it became undetectable, and every trace of another living being was just ... gone. I was alone. Detached. The third sense to go was smell. The intense, vicious drumming in my head slowed, it slowed as my pulse slowed, to nothing. The fourth sense to go was sound. My last memory, my very last thought, was of the taste of metal.

When I woke in the hospital, I was surrounded by the reddened eyes of those I had tried to free. I had survived. I lost so much blood and my brain was without oxygen for longer than anyone thought possible. My dad has called me Kitten since that day because no one thought I would ever wake up. Only a cat with nine lives could have survived that, so even the nurses started calling me Kitten.

This unfortunate event was what caused us all to go back to the hill, to say goodbye to Liz, and finally have closure. We each wrote her a little goodbye letter, and after we read them aloud we swore that from that day forward, we would let her go forever and move on. My mum was all about therapeutic closure, and that was what we had, a closing to her chapter. I was kneeling on the wet grass at the foot of her tree as we read our last goodbyes and cried.

Erik found it hard to understand why we were saying goodbye indefinitely and why we needed to create a new life without her past. Liz was his first sibling, his first responsibility. After reading his letter aloud through tears, he ripped it up and let the breeze scatter his words across the world. Those words could never be lost to the wind, though. We both remember them as clearly as the day he said them.

*Dear Liz,*

*Do you remember the first time you cried, and I cuddled you? The first time I cradled you in my arms and cried with you? You wouldn't stop apologising. I couldn't understand why you were sorry for crying. From*



*then on, I would cry whenever you cried. Because you should know that it is okay. It is okay to cry, Liz. My crying meant you could cry as much as you wanted to. I am sorry I couldn't save you. I am sorry I wasn't there when you needed me. I am sorry you had to cry alone for so long. You will never ever have to cry alone again.*

*Erik*

My father always wanted a daughter. My parents tried and tried for years. No one could love a little girl with more selflessness than that man could. Although it was never his fault, he blamed himself for not being able to control events that were uncontrollable. My father's letter remains in Liz's box, buried beneath her tree.

*Liz,*

*When you became a part of my life, my life became worth something. I became a father to a little girl. A girl who needed me more than I thought someone could possibly ever be needed. Being needed by you has made me worthy of life. I thought I knew what love was, but there is nothing in this world, or in death, that makes me feel anything close to what your love makes me feel. You loved me when I was a bad father, when I failed at work, when I failed as a husband. What I ever did to deserve you as a daughter, I will never know.*

*The first time you told me you loved me, was the first day I ever cried. Do you remember it? You had lost control of your little bike and it was racing down a hill. I could hear you screaming. I still wake up sweating some nights thinking about that sound. I was helpless. I couldn't help my little girl, couldn't protect her, couldn't find her, and that was my number one priority: to protect my little girl. I had failed.*

*When I finally found you, you were grazed and bleeding. You were such a brave little thing, there was not a tear to be seen. Your little pink bike pants were ruined, your helmet was cracked, and you looked at me with such disappointment in yourself that my heart broke. I cuddled you 'til you told me to stop and I cried. I cried because the thought of you hurting was more painful than anything else I had ever experienced before. When I cried, you told me you loved me. So, I cried again. Your love is worth more to me than all the love in the world. You were such a beautiful, gentle soul,*

*and I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry, Liz. I was too late to protect you. It won't happen again.*

*Daddy*

My mother was a saint. She never asked for anything in return for her lessons and love. A little bit of the world's beauty died when she did. My mother held me in her arms that day we said goodbye to Liz at the foot of her tree. My back was to her and she held me against her chest and kissed the top of my head. No one understood why we had to do this more than her. My mother's letter is in Liz's box also.

*Liz,*

*People say there are no words to describe the love a mother feels for her child. I tend to disagree. There are many. The real issue is that these beautiful, lavish, emotive words are far too often used in vain. The words I would use to describe my love for you are: unparalleled, unbounded, unbreakable, unconditional, immersive, miraculous, invigorating, immeasurable, FOREVER.*

*My love for you is unparalleled to anything I have ever felt or ever will. My love for you is unbounded and limitless, and it grows every second. My love for you is unbreakable, indestructible, and invincible. My love for you is unconditional, of your actions, or words. My love for you is immersive; it controls and seizes my soul and heart wholly. My love for you is miraculous, and it was born in pain and heartache and flourished into a presence of undeterminable beauty. My love for you is invigorating; it makes me want to be the person you think I am; it makes me want to be a better person. My love for you is immeasurable, and it holds too much weight and too much strength. My love for you, little girl, is forever. Forever and ever. I love you.*

*Mum xo*

Then there was my letter.

*To Liz,*

*Goodbye, Liz.*

*Blesk.*

Today I broke my promise. I came back. I swore I never would and never intended to. But I didn't come back for Liz, though. I came back for him. And because I didn't know where else to go.

I hold my breath while I brush the leaves off the hatch and swing it open. It flies back, pent-up with over a decade of concealment, releasing years of dust and eerie darkness, sucking in fresh air to mingle with its demons. For a few moments I only look down. I know what walking down those steps will do to me. The numbness has already set in.

As my feet take me down without consent, I'm surprised when I need to duck my head as I cross the threshold. It's quiet. The room is windowless. Except for the big barred cage in the corner, it is empty. The deafening silence is suddenly filled with ringing, and it takes me a few moments to realise it's my phone.

"Elise?" My own voice sounds foreign.

"Oh. My. God. Blesk! Where are you? Everyone is so worried. Jaxon and Konnor have been all over campus looking for you, and then when you didn't come home . . . It's 6:00 a.m. Where did you sleep last night?"

"On the train." Although I hold the phone pressed tightly to my ear, her voice sounds so distant. It's this box under the ground. It seems to separate everything inside it from everything outside. I take a seat on the fifth step—my favourite one. The concrete is cold on my thighs, but it isn't the literal cold that has me shivering.

"On a train? What do you mean? Where are you?" She sounds panicked.

"Ummm." I try to snap myself out of my trance. "Konnor was looking for me?"

"Oh my god, Blesk, seriously? Of course he was looking for you. He lost it. You just ran off. He looked for you everywhere, like a mental patient. He got really drunk and ended up knocking himself out when he fell over. Jaxon is with him now. Why didn't you pick up your phone?"

I gasp and cover my mouth, thinking of Konnor passed out on the floor. "I'm sorry." The words are not enough. They never will be.

"Sorry?" Poor Elise sounds so strange and confused. "We don't care. Please just tell me you're safe. When will you be home?"

"Erik is coming to get me."

"Okay, I'll tell Jaxon." Elise pauses for a long time, and for a few moments we listen to each other breathing hard. "Blesk?"

“Yes?” I whimper.

“What’s going on? You walked away with Konnor and then ran off. Did he do something? Did he hurt you?”

I draw a sharp breath in and release it slowly. “No, Konnor didn’t do anything. Maybe one day I’ll explain, but not today.”

“One day? So, it’s something bad, hey? Okay, I’m not gonna pressure you to tell me anything. I will be there for you, though. Whether you like it or not, you’re stuck with me.”

“That sounds *really good*, Elise.” I know my voice is unconvincing, but I really mean every word of that sentence.

“I’m small, but I’m scrappy. I’d kick Konnor’s arse if he hurt you!”

“It wasn’t anything Konnor did.”

“When will I see you?”

A small sigh escapes me. “I don’t know, maybe tomorrow.”

“Seriously? Don’t shut me out. I know I’m a new friend, but I don’t care. I want to be there for you.”

“Tomorrow. I promise, tomorrow,” I state with more conviction.

Elise sighs, and then tries to lighten the mood with her Yoda impression. “Best friend Elise has.”

“Best friend Blesk has,” I say, hanging up the phone and curling up on the step to wait for Erik.

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“Blesk?” I hear Erik’s voice spill down the stairs. The time that’s passed is vague, however, I’m almost certain I haven’t moved. For him to be here already, it must have been at least five hours since I spoke to him. I check my phone: 10:38 a.m.

“Shit, Blesk, I told you not to go in.” The scratch of the dirt rubbing between his shoes and the steps grows nearer. Before I even raise my head from the cold concrete he has me in his arms.

“I’m okay,” I say, as I’m pulled protectively into his chest, his hand stroking the back of my head. He smells like home, and is warm and nurturing in his movements, rocking me back and forth. “I’m sorry.”

“Shhh,” he hushes me. “Don’t, Blesk, it’s fine. I don’t understand why you’re back here, but it’s fine.”

Erik holds me against him, and I begin to cry.

"Thank you." My shoulders tremble, and his embrace tightens in response.

As my tears fall onto his chest and soak his shirt, he begins to cry, too. My heart aches for every bit of sorrow I cause him. He loves me. I'm never going to be worthy of it. Although I think he loved her more. I pull away from him and look up into his reddened eyes that look both sleepless and in anguish. His cheeks are flushed and wet, like mine.

*I'm sorry, Erik.*

"I love you." I hold his stare and he holds mine. "I'm sorry to put you through this again."

"Blesk, why are you here?" His brows knit into a serious line.

I look up at him through pools of tears. "It's Konnor."

His arms around my back stiffen unnervingly. He grips my hips and pulls me away so that he can inspect my face, scrutinise it even.

"What about Konnor?" The depth of the creases between his furrowed brows, and the tightness of his grip on my hips, caution me. I subtly try to shake him off, but his fingers are unforgiving. His eyes seem to dilate, filling with nothing but black. "I know you spent the night with him," he hisses, a different tone for him to use with me.

"So, we went out on a date," I say, defiantly.

A callous look tightens his face. "Oh. Right. *A date.*"

"Why are you doing this now?" I ask. "Please don't do this now."

"I hate that guy." He cups my face with his hands. "He's a total dickhead."

I try to pull away from him, but he doesn't let me. "Erik don't do this now. Not here."

"What did the dickhead do to make you go off the deep end?" His eyes make me squirm.

We've been here before. On Erik's eighteenth birthday we had a big party at our house. It was a humble affair in many ways. We didn't have a lot of money growing up, but Erik always had a lot of friends. There was one of his acquaintances, Max Butcher, who always seemed to be at the crux of every disturbance. Max ran with a dangerous crowd, and it was no secret that he was involved in less-than-legal endeavours. It was always imperative to keep Max Butcher happy, as he had three brothers all just as popular, with just as much charm, but with the command of a nasty crowd.

Max wasn't a bad guy; he just wasn't used to people saying no to him or telling him what to do. Max showed an interest in me that night, and I wasn't going to be the first girl to say no to Max Butcher. I was young and he was gorgeous. When Erik caught us making out on my bed, he went ballistic. He lunged, throwing his fist into Max's jaw. Max grunted. Then he stood, towering at six foot four inches and laid Erik out across the carpet where he kicked him over and over until Erik stopped moving.

Max left Erik bleeding, went downstairs, and resumed drinking all of our alcohol. Once again, my silly immature actions had taken a toll on someone I love. I knew what would happen. I get people hurt. Erik has never been okay with a single guy I've shown interest in. Although there are other reasons for his possessiveness, but I try to lock those away, and I do. That is until moments like this.

"Erik, don't," I plead.

He leans into my ear, and as his breath slides down my neck I shudder. "Tell me what he did to you, Blesk."

I pull away from him again, but he moves his hands down to grip my arms sturdily in front of him. "Let me go! What's gotten into you?"

My breathing feels strained. He keeps me captive next to his chest. "Blesk," he hisses. "I spent last night with Pembie."

My eyes widen. I can't even begin to imagine what she's been saying to him. "Erik, whatever—"

"Shut up for a second," he snaps. "She was really upset. She told me she found you in his apartment. And that you spent last night with him as well." I keep tugging gently away from him, but he seems to be moving in closer and closer to me.

As his cheek touches mine, he purrs, "Has he been inside you, Blesk?" The chill in his tone all but stops my heart. I whimper and try more forcefully to get away from him, tugging and pulling, but his fingers just sink deeper into my skin. "I swear to God, Blesk, if you let that dickhead inside you, I'm going to lose my shit."

Struggling in his grasp as I desperately fight back tears, I begin to beg, "Erik, don't talk to me like that... please."

I gasp when he pulls me up into his arms, picks me up and cradles me against his chest. He walks me down to the bottom of the chamber. "Erik!" I scream at him. "Put me down!" Then my back hits the floor, and the unforgiving surface knocks the wind from me. He covers my mouth with

his hand and I try to scream but can't, and he's coming down on top of me, crushing his body against mine, holding me captive below him. I can hardly breathe.

Tears drip down my cheeks. I blink through them and try to search the man on top of me for a glimpse of my brother.

"Shhhhhhh." His brown eyes drill holes into mine. "Blesk, I'm not going to hurt you. God, I love you. You know this. I would do anything for you. I have. But I know you won't listen to me unless you feel this again. How good this feels."

My eyes are so wide they are almost protruding my face, and I want to scream so much, but I still can't. He uses his hips to force my legs apart, kneading his pelvis into me, and the sudden taste and heat of bile fills my throat. I clasp my eyes shut, not wanting to see his face, not wanting to see the chilling look in his eyes.

He nuzzles into the crook of my neck and slides his tongue up the column of my throat, his breath slithering over me. A shudder snakes up my spine. I begin to sob.

"Blesk, see how good this feels. Please don't cry, Bebe." His hands are everywhere. All over my chest, squeezing me. Running down my thigh. His pelvis is rocking into me, his erection pushing hard between my legs. "God, no one else gets me this hard. Ever..."

My hands scrabble against the floor at my sides, digging my nails into the concrete until they hurt. "See, it's you and me. It will *always* be you and me."

My dress is lifted around my waist and the only thing separating me from him is my underwear. I feel his groan vibrate through my chest and wish away this moment, trying with absolute desperation to sink into oblivion.

"Don't you remember how good this was? The first time we did this. How close it made us? Best friends. Lovers. I don't want to pretend it didn't happen anymore, Blesk. The thought of Konnor touching you... Fucking hell, it's driven me out of my goddamn mind. I've been going crazy. And I know now that I just need to make you remember." He licks a tear from my cheek. "Please don't cry, Bebe."

I can feel him through my knickers, hard and aroused, and I just want to cry out *stop*. The word doesn't actually come out, it's blocked by his hand, but it's there in my thoughts and on my tongue.

“I’m the only person whose been inside you, right?”

I nod frantically.

“Good.”

When he unbuttons his jeans and shifts his weight to pull them down, my mind fades out, leaving him with my body. I can see the old lightbulb hanging loosely from the ceiling swinging back and forth . . . or maybe I am. It’s dark down here. Although I’ve spent many hours here, I’ve never looked at the ceiling from flat on my back before. But my hero boy must have, every night for years. I’ve never slept here. It has all these cracks running through the concrete like veins through skin. It may give way at any moment. I don’t think that would be a bad thing.

Not long after my sixteenth birthday, Erik woke me up from a nightmare just as he had many times before. He used to cry while I cried. He loved me so much that my anguish was torturing him. Some nights he wouldn’t sleep at all. He would stay by my side until I was silent and motionless. He told me that he watched me sleep so many nights that he knew by the expression on my face as I slipped into slumber whether I would sleep soundly or be tormented with memories of my past.

The first night it happened, I let him. I remember waking up to his fingers tracing my cheek and throat, tickling a gentle line down to where my breasts rose and fell. His eyes were rolling lovingly over my face as I batted my lashes back from sleep. I took comfort in his touch. Then, he changed our relationship forever. He’d told me I was the most beautiful girl in the world and that he’d felt things for me he knew he shouldn’t, wanted to do things to me he knew were wrong.

He’d said it felt like someone had their fists around his heart, squeezing it to the point of pain. He told me that his love for me corrupted his mind, and then he begged me to share one night with him as just a girl and a boy, one night when we weren’t adopted siblings. I never said yes. I never said no. I just let him touch me until he was done. I remember the pressure between my thighs, the cramp and sting of his first invasion. He thanked me over and over and over again while he moved inside me. He thanked me for easing the pain in his chest.

It wasn’t just one night, for we were forever changed. I couldn’t refuse him that first time or any other time he crawled on top of me. I owed him for so much. Not after everything he did for me... does for me. After I ruined his life, after losing Liz, after the beating he received from Max



Butcher, it seemed like a small thing to give him. My feelings for Erik have always curdled in the pit of my belly; a messed-up feeling that is both content within my big brother's arms, and ashamed of the things I let him do to me after dark.

He left for college and we never spoke of it again. The whole idea of this other side of our relationship seemed to vanish with him and the time apart enlightened me. I didn't want that kind of relationship with him. I didn't love him like that. I thought he was finished with me, and that we could go back to being siblings, but as he takes my body again, after so many years, I realise I was wrong.

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## NINE: Konnor

Their words are barely audible. Their voices are barely recognisable. My bloody head. My bloody angry, throbbing, pulsing head. Why didn't I chase a Panadol with a litre of water before I went to sleep? Rookie mistake. I sigh into the covers. Why do blankets feel so damn good when the last thing you want to do is get out of them? Soft and warm. Conscious thoughts slowly seep back in and my stinging eyes bat open, the uninvited light flickering into my half-masked irises. My jackarse of an alarm clock says it is 6:30 a.m., which means I have an hour left to sleep. My heavy eyes close again. Sleep is *good*... Then I hear a girl's voice, and when I realise it isn't Pemberton's, I jolt up.

*Blesk...*

I grip my forehead and stumble to my feet as fast as I can, almost tripping over the rug in my room. As I peer down at my body, I'm confused when I see I'm fully dressed. What happened last— *Oh, fuck!*

Rushing, I skid from my bedroom to face the terrible world that has seen me inebriated for such a long time. I trip over something and fall to my knees. The tiles under me do not forgive. My brain struggles to engage, my muscles wrestle to react, and my better judgements are caught in a thick fog.

When I raise my eyes to search the room, I am inundated with memories of last night. My apartment is a complete wreck. *Blesk*. Her face fills my mind, the way a projector portrays an image on a blank screen. How she felt in my arms, cradled beside my body. The feel of her rapid pulse against my skin. I begin to shudder, hungover and in shock. I need her here, need to touch her, need to know she's alright. I need to see her heart-shaped lips, her long hair, those damn chocolate pools. Two hands grab me and I squint up at Jax as he pulls me to my feet.

"Konnor!" He drags my drunken arse over to sit on the couch, but I shake him off.

I shoot up. "Where is she?"

"Mate, she's with Erik. She's fine." He puts his hands on my shoulders, pushing me back down until I'm sitting.

I frown and squint up at him. "I heard her!"

Elise walks over to stand in front of me. "No, Konnor, you heard me."

I rattle my head for a moment. Confusion clouds my mind; it's an unpleasant feeling that is hard to describe. The significance of yesterday is undeniable, although I'm not sure I could articulate what it even was. But she knows things. She responded to my finger on hers. She knows . . .

"You know where she is? Like, you spoke to her?" My voice is desperate and pleading, and I don't recognise it.

"Yes, she's fine. She'll be home tomorrow," Elise says delicately.

I massage my jaw with my palm, which feels like it took a punch last night. "Where's Drake?"

"He went home, buddy, he has early classes. Just chill out for a while." Jax nods and his pitying expression pisses me off.

"No!" I stand up and sway in place. "I need to find Blesk."

Jax puts his hand on my shoulder again. "Konnor, you're not thinking straight—"

"I don't expect you guys to understand!" I snap. "But I need to find her. Now."

They stare at each other and attempt to communicate without words, sharing worried looks.

Elise turns towards me and tilts her head, "She said—"

"I don't care what she *fucking* said!" I yell.

Those words were not meant to come out so aggressively, and I definitely didn't want to make Elise's smile recoil the way it just did. Jax frowns at me, and I sink to the couch in defeat. I glance up at Elise apologetically, but she's smiling down at me again.

"Seriously, dude?" Jax shrugs at me. "Don't talk to Elise like that, man."

*Fuck.*

I shake my head. "I'm sorry, Elise."

She feigns indifference. "Don't be silly, it's fine. I'm glad you care so much about her. I'm sure it has to do with the whole beating you with your own leg threat, so ... I'm going to take complete credit." She laughs again,

and Jax chuckles. My head drums again, and I try to shake the noise out, but it just sloshes around between my ears in retaliation.

“Elise,” I say. “What happened? Did she tell you? Was it something that I did? I—”

She cuts in. “She didn’t tell me, but she sounded concerned about you ... so I don’t think it was something you did.”

I look Jax straight in his eyes, almost pleading. “Please mate, understand, I need to look for her. I’m going with or without you.”

“You don’t know where she is,” he insists.

“She’s with her brother?” I ask.

Confusion crosses his face. “Yes, she’s with Erik.”

“Well, Pemberton has Erik’s *find my phone* password.” She set it up on his phone while they were sleeping together and I know this, because she did the same to me. “Let’s go get her!”

Elise’s face brightens, and then she turns to look almost mischievously at Jax. “Let’s do it, Jaxon.”

He blinks at her. “Really?”

“Yes, definitely!” she exclaims with a big cheeky smile.

Jax tilts his head to me and smirks. “Konnor, I don’t think Pemberton will help you find, Blesk.” He shrugs in a dubious manner. “Just saying, buddy.”

“How about we tidy up a bit, and you go talk to your ex?” Elise dramatically enunciates the word “ex.”

*As if I need reminding.*

I would do anything for Blesk, even if that means facing Pembie.

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Though it took some cajoling and sweet-talking and reminding Pemberton that we were friends first, I finally got the information out of her that I needed. We hit the road; Jax is driving and Elise is in the back seat watching the world go by. It will take us just under four hours to get to Camden if we don’t stop. Camden is only thirty minutes from my hometown, Brussman, in The District.

I put my feet up on the dash and lean my seat back slightly, relaxing into it. I have an old pair of jeans on and my hoodie is pulled down over my

stinging eyes. I squeeze them tightly shut and ponder what I'm going to say when I see Blesk. If I wasn't so hungover I could potentially form more constructive thoughts, perhaps formulate a game plan of some kind. Erik's phone appears to be on a farm. The satellite view on Google maps, didn't show any houses or construction at all. If it's accurate, he's in the middle of an empty field. Elise brought Blesk a change of clothes, a jumper and leggings; she's such a considerate little thing. I catch Jax fondly looking at her every now and then. Elise doesn't seem to notice.

"I've never been on a road trip before," I hear Elise say.

I pull back my hoodie and sit up, twisting in the seat to look at her. She has her legs scooped up to the side as she leans on the door and stares out the window.

"Never?" Jax glimpses at her in the rear-view mirror.

"Nope," she confirms.

"What about with your family? Vacations or something?" He keeps both hands on the wheel and a keen eye on the road but offers her a glance every so often.

"No, my mums both work nonstop. Trying to save the world from scum. I had a nanny for a while, but then I was just sort of on my own. I liked my nanny, though. She was good fun and would paint my nails and stuff. My mums hated that." That memory makes her chuckle under her breath.

"Mums?" Jax asks and bumps my arm.

"Mums?" I repeat with a grin.

She giggles. "Boys are pathetic." She shakes her head at our eagerness. "Yes, mums. I have two mums."

"What do your mums do?" Jax asks.

"They're both lawyers. They saw a lot of messed up stuff, a lot of messed up people. It was hard for me to have a life."

"So, no road trips with friends, no school-leaver weekend? No summer camps?" Jax asks. "No road trip songs or games? *No road trip junk food?*" He sounds genuinely disgusted, and I can't prevent myself from laughing at his mock distress, as if never having a road trip is on par with never being told you are loved.

"Nope, none of the above. Although I don't need road trips to have junk food," she states adamantly

"That sucks, Elise," I add.

“Oh, man, no. This is no good,” Jax says in comical disapproval. “Junk food on the road is totally different than junk food at home.” He continues to shake his head and frown. “Nope, this will not do at all.”

I grin from ear to ear when he pulls into the strip lane and takes an exit off the highway.

I look back at Elise, who is peering at me, confused. “What’s he doing?”

“You’ll see.”

We pull into a petrol station and we both jump out the car, leaving Elise staring inquisitively through the window at us. We shove each other a little as we strut into the servo. The sliding door opens, and I make my way straight for an iced coffee. Blesk must be hungry, so I grab two and check out the breakfast bars. I hover over the meal-replacement congregation and feel immediately disappointed that I have no idea if she is allergic to nuts, or if she likes chocolate, or if she even drinks coffee.

What do I know about Blesk? She’s a musician, her mum died a few years ago, her brother’s a dickhead, she is the most extraordinary girl I’ve ever met, with the sweetest smile, a giggle that makes me want to spend every day of my life making sure it happens over and over again... Is that it? Is that really all I can come up with?

*I don’t deserve her.*

Jax approaches me with his arms full of food, packages crunching within his grasp. He dumps it all on the counter and grabs a couple of magazines from the rack, as well as *The Best of The Beatles*.

As we get back into the car, Elise is beaming. Jax leans over the seat and hands her the bags. “Right, now, I know you don’t eat much meat?”

Elise looks shocked, and so do I—and impressed. I know absolutely nothing about Blesk. “How do you know that?” she asks, searching through the bags.

“We chatted about the agriculture industry at The Basement Lounge, remember?”

“Wow, I can’t believe you remember that. I never actually said I was a vegetarian. It’s kind of a well-established fact that guys don’t usually listen to girls like me.”

“Girls like you?” I query, unimpressed by her self-deprecating words.

She snorts. “You know.”

“No, we don’t,” Jax states, with his brows knit together in disapproval.

“Well, I don’t look like Blesk,” she mumbles.

“No, you don’t,” he repeats, staring at her in the rear-view mirror. “You look like Elise, and that is exactly how you should look... Anyway, well, I got the usual must-haves: Starbursts, Skittles, Maltesers. I couldn’t find any Pez, which is disappointing, but I found these weird Vege-Strip things, that look kinda like jerky but are vegetarian.”

*Smooth motherfucker.*

He starts the car and tries not to look too proud of himself, but I can see the smugness oozing from his eyes, and I want to taunt him mercilessly. I chuckle on a cough and he subtly hits me in the stomach. “But I did get us boys real jerky, Pork Crackle, and cheese sausages, ’cause it ain’t a road trip without ’em. I hope you don’t mind?”

I flash a serious expression back to Elise, who is flushing pink. “I am eating my cheese sausage,” I say definitively.

“Oh, of course,” she mutters, shoving some lollies into her mouth. “I don’t expect you guys to go without.”

Jax chucks me a grin. “Good to know.” He slides The Beatles in the CD slot, and we all start singing “Penny Lane” at the tops of our lungs as we hoe into our assortment of preservative-based goodies.

Australia is a weird country. As we travel north across the plane, the landscape varies from vast reds to flourishing greens. For the first few hours, it’s flat and dry, akin to a desert. Hours later, it’s green and tropical. Elise researches each town we drive through and relays some interesting and some not-so-interesting facts.

When we turn down a dirt road and pass a sign that reads “Main Estate,” discomfort immediately jackhammers through me. We pass an old broken-down homestead, which is overrun by vines but still distinctively stunning. With large white pillars, at least three stories and still sporting its original timber frame construction, it looks like a waste of a great family home. It isn’t until we come to the end of the dirt-track that we notice Erik’s car parked up on top of a hill. A sandy track leads up the hill to its peak and then continues along the top.

“Lucky we brought the Prado and not the Beamer, hey?” Jax halts the car at the dead-end and turns to look at us questioningly. “Should we drive up there? Or walk?”

My pulse suddenly quickens, but I’m not exactly sure why. Something is wrong. My gut knots up, and I unconsciously clutch at my stomach. I

squint up at Erik's car. *All those daisies, all those trees, that bright sun, that sweet smell.* Ringing fills my ears, and I start breathing violently in response to my heart's beat. This doesn't make sense, it's not like I've been here before. Words float into my foggy mind.

*"It is the daisies. They are my favourite flower. I will bring you a new one every day."*

*"You don't have to."*

*"I want to share them with you. They light up the world."*

*"No, you do that."*

"What's up, man? Slater? What's up? Slater!"

Someone is jerking me back and forth, and I turn to meet Jax's eyes. "Huh?"

"Slater, where did you just go?" He looks at me concerned, and turns back to Elise

Elise touches my shoulder and leans forward to catch a better view of my face. "Konnor? Are you okay?"

"Yeah." I nod in a haze of uncertainty. "Sorry. Why wouldn't I be?"

They frown at each other. Elise speaks cautiously and rubs my arm with her little hand. "You just zoned out."

"Wait here," I say, and before I know what I'm doing, I'm running up the hill. Every muscle in my body is tight and focused wholly on my incline. My feet and arms are driving me forward, and I grunt under my breath. *Why am I sprinting?* I couldn't move faster if I were being chased.

Running, jumping, panting until I reach the top and am drilled by the sun's beams. I raise my forearm to shield my eyes from the invading light, squinting around the area, searching. Then it happens. I freeze up. My muscles lose all strength, all motion, all density. My head gets lighter and lighter as if inflating with air. The silence around me only makes the sudden thundering in my ears seem louder.

My head swivels around as I try to find something to focus on. I can see a hatch and stairs leading down, down, into a basement, a dark, dark, *fucking basement.* I slam my jaw shut and clench my teeth until they hurt. Some seconds pass, or moments, or an hour. Time has no order right now. It isn't until I hear her small cry that my brain retrieves its senses.

*Fucking move, Konnor.*



That little weeping sound. My whole-body hurts as my pulse runs rampant through my veins. I peer down to my immobile shoes and attempt to lift them, wrestling with the terrifying paralysis. They stay frozen to the grass beneath. I inhale several quick fierce breaths. I hear it again. A masculine moan. *A feminine sob.*

“Please, don’t,” My whole body throws itself forward down the stairs as if it were possessed. As soon as I’m officially underground, the air gets so thick it is hardly breathable.

His lips are on her. His body is pressed against her. Her eyes are filled with tears . . .

A bolt of heat strikes my temple, and everything goes pitch black.

Then I’m wailing on him. My fists are red and raw. Every punch deforms his face further. I’m straddling him, pinning him to the ground——just like he did to her. Nailing him with every inch of strength I contain and some I don’t. The *thumps* turn into *cracks*. All I see is red. I’m going to destroy him. I hear grunting, loud, angry grunting, and it takes me a few moments to realise it’s coming from me. My fists pummel his face and come away from it wet. When I hit a bone and hear a *crunch*, my hand flies back, spraying blood everywhere. Suddenly I can’t reach him anymore as I’m being pulled backwards. I’m torn from him, kicking and yelling, —volatile and animalistic. Erik is groaning on the floor, spluttering up mouth loads of blood and bile. I’m heaving wildly and grinning menacingly as he chokes on his own secretions. Elise rushes over and attempts to clear his throat. She checks his pulse, rips his shirt, and presses the material to the gushing cuts on his face.

I can’t think straight. I can’t feel anything other than the need to inflict pain on him. He was on my girl. My hands are pumping at my waist, anger is clawing at my back.

I jolt towards him and spit on his face. “Leave him to rot!” I growl.

“Shit, Slater!” Jax yells while dragging me back. “Think about the girls, Slater!”

“Konnor.”

Her sweet shaky voice crashes through my haze, snapping me back to here and now.

Snapping me back to what I saw and to what I now know. I shove Jax off and spin like a crazed animal in search of her face, desperation manifesting itself in my every frantic movement. I am covered in sticky

blood and dripping in sweat. Every inch of me is twitching with fury and fear, a tangled combination of fight and flight. Even though the whole world is blurry I can make out their silhouettes. I focus more sharply until I distinguish her trembling frame. I see her face, that sweet girl, my everything.

My sunshine.

I remember.

We both stand still as statues as the truth we have both felt since we laid eyes on each other engulfs us. I gulp down a dry knot when I see her beauty in a totally new way. The word gets caught in my throat. I mouth the name first.

Then I yell.

“Liz!”

Her face breaks and floods of tears burst from her eyes as she drops to her knees.

“Oh, God, don’t call me that!” she cries.

I rush to her as she lands on the floor, wrapping my arms tightly around her shuddering body, holding her with desperation. Pained sounds of explode from her.

*There is no way I’m ever letting her go. No way I’m ever going to let anyone take her away from me again.*

*You died.*

“You died, you died!” I blubber hysterically, gushing with emotions I hadn’t realised a man could express. My tears fall down hard and fast on her like rain, as her little hands clutch at my clothes, and her face buries into my chest, I try to calm down, I try to calm *her* down. I thread my fingers through her golden hair, and grip it like silk against me, remembering how often I wanted to do just that—touch her hair. She is finally in my arms. After all these years I can touch her. She smells like peaches, and I know why. Ever since I saw her at The Grill, somewhere inside me I knew it was her. I felt it.

Through the haze of my memories, through the daze I was in for nearly four years, I knew. Though I felt I didn’t know much about Blesk, I know everything about Liz. What do I know about Liz? She loves to read. She loves to twirl. Her smile can light up the whole damn world. When she’s nervous, she bites her lip. She would rather skip than walk, she loves white chocolate, her birthday is March 20, her favourite colour is the same green

as my eyes . . . And she's my best friend and she loves me. This is by far the best moment of my *entire* life. I can't hear anything other than my heart drumming in my head, because it is so overwhelmed. Sublime happiness. My mind aches on overdrive, processing and evaluating. She's alive.

*The girl I have been in love with for seventeen years is alive.*

As she sobs, I rock her back and forth. Pretending it is once again just the two of us, my voice cracks as I whisper to her the last story we wrote. The story we wrote the day before she died.

"There was once a boy named Deakon. He spent a lot of time away from the sun, but he had shining dreams. One day he looked in the mirror and reflected in his eyes was a girl. She had golden hair and chocolate eyes. Years later while he was walking past a shop front, he caught the reflection of a girl in the window. Yet when he turned around, she was gone. She was the same girl reflected in his eyes, the same girl he had dreamed would be there by now. He dreamed of her, seeing her by his side everywhere he goes. He spent years travelling, searching, meeting beautiful people and beautiful girls. No matter how far he went, or how many people he met, or how beautiful they were, they were never as beautiful as the girl in his eyes, the girl in the window, the girl in his dreams. One day they will be together, and she will be by his side, reflected in his eyes, next to him in the window and in his dreams. His dream girl."

## TEN: Deakon

The boy believes he's become a dog. Pacing his home, from the bed to the toilet and back again, he ponders this revelation. He squeezes his eyes shut and concentrates, summoning his inner dog. He bares down, trying, trying, changing... and then it happens. He can hear the trees talking and chatting around outside the basement. He can hear the bees gossiping and singing, telling him stories and making him laugh out loud. He can hear everything and everyone; they all talk to him at once.

The boy opens his eyes and stares at the concrete wall, nodding to himself. The darkness has given him strength, and his mind is expanding to connect him with the world. He is evolving. He is becoming something else. He can hear the girl, every step, every step, every step. When the latch swings open, he can hear the chamber breathing, sucking in clean air and releasing the stale. He can hear her heart racing as she slowly descends the steps, each little step measured and cautious. *Yes*, he thinks, he has *finally* become a dog.

The boy doesn't know what time it is, or what seconds, minutes, and hours are. And he doesn't know which is longer. The girl brings him meals, and he counts them, desperate to know how long he's been away from home. He can only count to ten. He has already done that ten times.

*Why have I run out of numbers?*

To the boy, that can only mean one thing—he has been in the cage forever. He *used* to wish he could count higher; he used to wish for more numbers.

At first the beautiful girl refused to talk to him until he stopped crying out, until he stopped screaming, until he stopped asking why.

Meal seven. That was the first time she spoke to him.

"I want to be a dog," the boy had said to the girl during meal seven. Those six words changed him, sated him. *I want to be a dog*. This was the first time the boy spoke words without sobs, without begging to go home.—

“A dog has good hearing. Very good. A dog can run fast, too. And... and they live in cages, too. Boys don’t live in cages. I think I might be changing into a dog. Do I look like a dog?”

She had stared at him, rings of violet blemishing each brown pool. “You could be a dog,” she nodded slowly, “*maybe*. Turn around.” The boy spun around, his arms out wide so she could inspect him. She nodded again. “Yes, yes, I think you are.”

*I like her voice.*

A spike of excitement hit the boy, and he gripped the bars, peering between the gaps at the girl. “If I’m a dog, then this is okay,” he said, his tone calm for the first time in minutes, or hours, or days—he wasn’t sure which. “This room is good for a dog. The food, too.”

A small smile tugged at the girl’s swollen and bruised lips. “I’d like to be a cat.”

“Why a cat?” he had asked, scrunching up his nose in disapproval.

“A cat can climb high. Higher than people can reach.”

The boy tilted his head in thought, releasing a little sigh. Yes, he thought, she should be a cat. “Can I name you?” he asked, a flutter filling his chest at the thought. “The cat you?”

“Yes,” she replied, sitting on the fifth step, watching him pace around in contemplation.

“Ummm?” The boy hesitated. “What about Sunshine?”

“Okay,” she agreed. The boy’s lips curved up, his cheeks revealing distinct dimples. She smiled back and asked, “Can I name you?”

“Yeah,” the boy said to Sunshine.

“Kon.” The girl’s sweet voice filled his chest with hope. “My mum...” her voice broke, “my mum was Irish. Kon means ‘dog’ in Gaelic.”

Ever since that day, the boy has slowly become a dog. He used to spend many minutes or hours or days huddled in his bed, crying and moaning for help. He’d hold himself and rub his arms, pretending his hands weren’t his, pretending they were someone else’s, someone who cared. He wanted to know if he was still alive, a boy, a son, loved... He thought, how do I know I’m alive? The boy wasn’t sure. He’d fall asleep with no tears left inside him, and wake with salt streams crusted on his cheeks, knots tying his insides, and uncontrollable tremors. He was lost in the dark, losing himself, losing his name, losing his memories, losing his faith. The dark started to swallow his feelings, and in return gave him new ones. He couldn’t count

the meals, and he believed without the numbers to guide his living moments, he wasn't alive, he wasn't moving forward. He hated the number ten. He wanted to learn.

*Why can't I count?*

But now, now he doesn't need to learn. He doesn't need to count because he's becoming a dog.

He believes he's lucky.

Unfortunately, the girl is not. She hasn't become a cat; she can't climb out of reach. The girl goes to school for the minutes or hours or days, and learns to read, count, write; she is a girl, and he is her dog. The boy doesn't mind; he likes being hers. Now, he wakes up with bright eyes. He waits for her, the minutes or hours or days, and when he sees her she spoils him. Tells him stories. Feeds him and sings to him. His place is in the cage, in the basement, below the daisy-covered ground; he knows his place now. He doesn't feel lost anymore.

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## ELEVEN: Blesk

When I wake up with Konnor's arm draped over my waist, his chest pressed against my back, and our legs tangled together, I know everything I have tried to escape has caught up with me.

The room is dim with its iridescent overhead light, the curtains pulled shut, and the only indication of the hour comes through in honks and horns from the below city street. The harrowing look on Konnor's face when he pulled Erik off me comes crashing into my consciousness. My mind was blank, and my mouth was dry. I was incapable of pleading with Konnor to stop because part of me didn't want him to.

Konnor beat Erik within an inch of his life, and I just stood there, motionless. He didn't stop because he couldn't. The room wouldn't let him. It owns him. It owns me, too, but not in the same way. I'm now burdened with the image of Erik on top of me, his tongue sliding up my cheek, chasing my tears. A choked whimper escapes me, and I force my eyes open, willing the images away.

A bittersweet feeling contracts my heart as I fixate on a framed picture on Konnor's bedside table. It is his high school graduation photo, featuring him alongside two attractive girls and a doting father and mother figure. He has siblings. A non-biological family but it's apparent by their expressions of pride that it was never an issue. He was smiling, he was gorgeous... *is* gorgeous. I wonder how many girls fell in love with that smile.

I can feel my eyes stinging, and I would be crying looking at him in that moment, had I any tears left. With that dimpled smile and perfect green eyes, he was happy. I can feel his breath like silk on my neck, and when I shuffle my feet, his arm pulls me in closer to him. I wish he were just Konnor Slater. But when he touched our index fingers together, I knew. He wasn't just Konnor Slater. He's the boy whose life I ruined, whose life I stole.

On the drive home yesterday I thought about nothing, as if it is something you can contemplate, break apart, and put back together. Nothing. Years of practice has taught me that you can't cry forever—eventually your body will shut down and put you to sleep. I fell asleep in the car on the way back to campus, huddled against Konnor, who was quieter than me for the most part, except for the occasional snuffle.

Neither Jaxon nor Elise in the front seat spoke or inquired about what had happened. They will, I'm sure. I need to speak to Elise, who must be so confused. Perhaps she hadn't realised what a complete head-case her new best friend is. When I get close to people, they get hurt, so I have avoided relationships. My heart aches for Erik and Konnor. They are both victims of mine and I take responsibility for them equally. Erik loved me from the moment he saw me, protected me like a brother, even though he wasn't. I led his family through hell. Erik loves me. What he did yesterday was wrong, and he will realise that when he wakes in the hospital. Whether I can forgive him, whether I can forget, I'm not sure. Did I say no when he pushed me to the ground? I can't remember. Surely, he would have stopped if I'd said the word ... he doesn't deserve to be despised. I'm not sure what he deserves ...

Konnor, on the other hand, deserves every goodness the world can provide, every chance, every shortcut. If I could give up my life to ensure his happiness, I would. I tried to. After what I did to Deakon, to Konnor, I'd always hoped he would hate me. He doesn't know my role in his capture, in those years of torture. I tried to disappear. We buried Liz. I moved on as if she never existed. But here he is, with his warm chest pressed against my back, his scent all around me, and his face nuzzled into my hair. He doesn't hate me.

*I wish he did.*

"Blesk?" he murmurs, tightening his arm around me. Konnor's breath is warming, and I want to snuggle into him as if he is just Konnor, but he isn't; he is also Deakon.

"Blesk?" He moves and when I turn and peer back at him, he's leaning on his elbow staring down at me. His chest rises and falls noticeably faster as we gaze at each other, his eyes sleepy and stunning. "Baby, shit. I thought I dreamt yesterday." His expression is tight but filled relief. I know mine portrays the opposite.



“Say something, Blesk?” he says, searching my face with those big, wholesome green eyes. The same eyes that inspired my love of the colour green. My mouth moves and I want to say, “Hi. Have you had a good life? How was your first day of school? Did you enjoy your high school graduation ball? Did you ever learn to waltz? Were you popular? Was your second kiss as beautiful as your first? How many girls have fallen head-over-heels in love with you? And . . . I’m sorry.”

Yet all I can come up with is, “Morning.”

“Good morning,” he sighs, with relief. “Do you like coffee?” He stares at me as if that question has been swirling around in his mind incessantly, and now I can see something like excitement bouncing across his face. “Do you eat bacon?” His voice hits a higher pitch. “Or eggs? I just have to know. I want to know everything. Do you want pancakes? Blesk, I will make you fucking pancakes if you want, or waffles, or—”

“Konnor.” I hold my hand up to his silly smile and can’t help but grin back at him. “I like coffee.”

He exhales loudly. “I like coffee, too. Coffee it is. How do you like your coffee?”

“Black, no sugar.”

When he rolls off the bed and walks towards the kitchen, I jolt up and try to remember how to breathe, trembling and shacking my head back and forth as if to say no to the universe. I don’t want to be her. I hate her. He should, too. But I can’t deny him anything. His adorable smile gives me everything, every inch of its truth. His great smell, deep and masculine. I’m hopeless in his presence.

My eyes scroll over the room, and I catch Konnor watching me from the doorway, his brows knit together. As he walks back over and sits down beside me with a cup of coffee, his face is tight again. “Here,” he says, holding it out for me to take. “You don’t look happy.”

“I am,” I say. “I’m just... it’s a lot.”

He sighs. “Yeah... Did you know?”

“No,” I shake my head, taking the cup and smelling the lovely pungent scent. “No, I mean, sort of. I don’t know.”

“Same,” he says, peering down at the crumpled sheets. I sip on my coffee and observe his change in demeanour, notice that he looks tormented with memories of his past and mine. It’s my fault. He was excited to wake up next to me, and I must look completely off-kilter. Guilt hits me, and I

wish I were nothing but happy to see him, I wish this meant we could start over, be together, have the life we spoke about.

“Konnor?” I put my cup on his bedside table.

His eyes bore into mine as he strokes my cheek with his knuckles, chewing on the inside of his lip. “Liz?”

I gasp. “Please, please don’t call me that.”

He cringes at my tone. “What should I call you?”

“Blesk! Call me Blesk!”

“That isn’t your name,” he states blankly.

“It is!” I insist and move away from his gentle caress and scrutinising eyes. “It has been for a long time.”

Konnor winces and disappointment distorts his features. “Why don’t you want to remember us?”

“I need a shower,” I mumble evasively.

His frown pulls his face tighter, and he points at a door. “There. What’s mine is yours.”

Even though I shouldn’t stand and walk away from him, I do. I spin on the mattress and pace over to the bathroom, locking it behind me. If I turn back for even a moment and see the pain in his eyes, it will break my heart. When I hear the door click shut, I slide down it and cover my face with my hands. My elbows meet my knees, and I cry tearless sobs as silently as I can.

I look down at my stupid red dress, still covered in paint from a time before yesterday, from a time when things were simpler. Twenty-four hours. That is all it takes to change everything. A small whimper forces its way through my lips as I consider what I’ve lost: my new life, my brother, and the chance to be with Konnor as just Konnor.

“Blesk?” Konnor’s worried voice calls through the door. “Blesk, I’m so sorry.” That he just apologised *to me* after everything I did floods me with guilt. I drop my head backwards against the cold wood door. Knock. Knock.

“I shouldn’t have pushed . . .” He pauses. “What’s that noise?”

I drop my head back one last time, and sigh. We both remain silent for several minutes, and then his deep husky voice permeates the door again. “I don’t know what you’ve been through. Or what this must be like for you. And after yesterday—” He stops abruptly and hisses through his teeth, “Fucking Erik.”

He growls and hits something hard enough for me to feel the vibration. “Just know I’m happy. I couldn’t be happier. I thought you died. Everyone told me you died. But you’re here, in my bathroom. It’s so much to take in, and I’m so happy, but I’m also scared I’m gonna lose you again. I want to be here for you. I *am* here for you, every day for the rest of your life, *Blesk*. No one will ever hurt you again. Ever.” He knocks on the door with his palm, or perhaps his head. “Blesk? Look, just take a shower. But then come out and talk to me... *Please*.”

Huddled up in the corner of the shower, hugging my knees, with the steamy water pouring down on me, I consider actually accepting my looming fate —just for a few days. He has been through hell and back. I hold all the answers and memories to his past. Once I’ve told him everything I did, everything I kept him from, all of his dreams and wishes, he will let Liz go, too. Then both of us can move forward, again. I analyse something he said, “I am here for you, every day for the rest of your life, *Blesk*.” He doesn’t know that I can’t be what he wants me to be, because finding each other is not a blessing, it’s a tragedy. We can never be more than friends now, because I don’t want to be loved for her.

Konnor is everything I knew Deakon would be: charismatic, charming, strong, brave, endearing. After I release him from Liz and me he’ll be able to continue to be everything I knew he would be. I soap myself up and down, standing under the faucet and watching as the water rushes down me and the soap disappears through the drain. All trace of Erik’s mistake, his touch and smell, sucked down into the pipes.

I scrunch-dry my long thick blonde hair and blanket myself in his towel. When I swing open the bathroom door, Konnor is slumped over on the bed, with his face buried in his hands, which are wrapped in white bandages. He raises his head when he hears me and then quickly stands. “Blesk, you okay?” His eyes are bloodshot and I hope he hasn’t been crying, but I think he has.

“Yes.” My heart thumps hard within my chest as he rakes my body, covered by only his towel. A chill rushes through me, and my naked legs break out in goose bumps. I like how he looks at me, like he worships me. But then his eyes dart away and he shifts in place, almost out of discomfort. That response is another reason why I don’t want him to think of me as *her*. He wouldn’t have avoided me a few days ago, he would have tried to hold me. But now, twenty-four hours later, he turns away from me. *Does he think*

*of me as a sister now? Did seeing Erik with me spoil me? Am I ruined for him?*

“Konnor?” I mutter without moving from the doorway. He walks away from me and out of sight, not glancing up once. I grimace, get dressed quickly into the clothes Elise brought for me, and then tip toe over to meet him sitting on the couch.

He shoots up. “You okay?”

“I’m fine! Please stop acting like I’m made of glass.”

He shakes his head in confusion. “What?”

“You’re treating me differently!”

“Yeah,” he nods, “of course I am. You mean more to me than anyone else in this *damn* world. I am not going to look at you like you are just *another* girl.”

“So that is how you looked at me before?”

“No,” he exclaims. “*Christ*, I always looked at you different.”

“Then look at me like that again.”

He locks his jaw and speaks through gritted teeth. “I *can’t*. Not right now. You’re my Liz,” he gushes.

My brows tighten. “No, I’m not!”

It took me years to build some semblance of a life and bury my past, but now he wants to dig it all back up. Before I realise what I’m doing I rush towards his apartment door. I need to get away from him and process this alone.

He runs after me and slams himself against it, and his face dips to mine. “Come on, not again. I’m sorry. I don’t know *how* to act. I’m doing the best I can given the circumstances.”

He searches my gaze as I try desperately to avoid him, knowing his soft, beautiful eyes will further weaken my resolve. I try to stiffen my lower lip as trembles begin to take control. He clasps my jaw, tilting it until my eyes meet his. I can feel my body start to quake with repressed emotions, wanting to burst out and be free. “I know you aren’t my *sister*, Blesk. I’m not acting like this because that’s what I think. I’m just trying to respect you, babe, and be nice to you. That is *all* this is. After everything that happened yesterday... I have no idea how to act...”

We take a few moments just like we did last time, with his back to the apartment door and my hand on the door handle.

“Blesk. Do you want me to be corny?” He grins and both cheeks display those adorable dimples. “Will that make you smile again?” He forces a chuckle before saying, “You had me at cello!”

A subtle smile betrays my anguish as I squeeze my eyes tightly shut, feeling so confused. I'm completely drained.

“Konnor,” my voice shakes, “I just want you to treat me like Blesk. *Please.*”

“Okay . . . Blesk.” He lets out a heavy sigh. “Can we go back to the couch? Can you stop trying to run away from me?” He combs my hair with his fingers and gives me a feigned cocky grin. “It kinda hurts my ego.” A half-smile draws my lips out and I nod, just once.

“Blesk, talk to me, *please*. You must remember everything, better than I do” He pulls his fingers through my hair and stares at the strands as if they are the most beautiful creation on earth. His eyes stop on my neck and then trace my long locks as they bounce down over my décolletage. “I remember *you... Blesk.*” He studies my face. “You’re a duchess, ya know that? You were always beautiful, but now, you have grown into this *extraordinary* woman.”

I raise my hand and cup his cheek, watching as he closes his eyes and moves into my caress. “Konnor?” My voice is weak, overcome by the intensity of what I’m about to ask. “Have you had a good life?”

His eyes flutter open, and they fall softly on my face again. “I’ve had an awesome life. And it’s about to get better.”

Before we left the cell yesterday, I had retrieved the box we’d hidden under the stairs thirteen years ago. An old fishing tackle box filled with letters and drawings, stories, songs and notes from our four years together. I grab his hand and pull him down onto the rug so that our legs are crossed in front of us and our knees are touching.

“These are your memories,” I say. Konnor watches, stone-faced, as I gently place the box in his lap, as if its significance could somehow weigh him down and hurt him. He exhales, and his eyes narrow with concentration as he opens the box. My head starts to spin when I see its contents, and our shared memories wash over me like waves. He touches the multi-coloured pieces of paper with his fingers, and I’m overwhelmed with too many feelings at once.

He picks one up. “Should I read it?”

“Only if you want,” I mutter softly. He unfolds one and peers the text, a small smile playing on his lips. My hand flies to my mouth when he begins to read it aloud.

“Deakon: *D* is for *dream*, *E* is for *Everything*, *A* is for *Armour*, *K* is for *King*, *O* is for *Oath*, *N* is for *New*.” His face brightens and he chuckles to himself. “Kids, hey?” Strangely enough, I laugh, too. “Did you write that or did I?”

“Liz did when she was five” I murmur.

He unfolds another piece of paper. “It’s a song.”

Konnor reads the words aloud, his voice shaking.

*One day*

*Verse One*

*The merry-go-round will spin, her hair will swirl like a mill.*

*The grass gets caught in his socks as he rolls down the hill.*

*The sunshine stays all night, they’ll live in emotional light.*

*The boy won’t let them fight, they’ll forever be alright,*

*Chorus*

*One day could be one day away.*

*One day isn’t that far away but just sure isn’t today.*

*Certainly not this, certainly not now, certainly not this way.*

*Verse Two*

*When they dance together, he holds her and never lets go,*

*When they sing together, he’s proud to put her on show,*

*The sunshine will warm his morns with her lips and kisses,*

*The boy will support her bow, make sure she never misses,*

*Chorus*

*One day could be one day away.*

*One day isn’t that far away but just sure isn’t today.*

*Certainly not this, certainly not now, certainly not this way.*

*Verse Three*

*They will yell from the hill their voices will fill the air,*

*They will promise with their special index-finger swear,*

*That one day.*

*The sunshine will smile, on a new day, that day, one day.*

*The new boy will glow, on a new day, that day, one day.*

*Chorus*

*One day could be one day away.*

*One day isn't that far away but just sure isn't today.  
Certainly not this, certainly not now, certainly not this way.  
But Maybe one day.*

After he reads the last sentence, he holds the sheet to his heart and shuts his eyes, letting out a sigh. I place my hand on his and allow the recollection of those memories, and that promise never fulfilled, to play in our minds. When he opens his eyes again, they are glistening with emotion. "Wow," he breathes. "There is no way I wrote that." He looks sad and happy, if an expression can be both. "Blesk, you're a genius... how old were you when you wrote that?"

"Liz was eight."

He puts his hand on my knee and strokes my leg tenderly. "Does it have a melody?"

I give him a shy nod as a little tear rushes from the corner of my eye. "Yes."

He smiles at me sweetly and wipes the tear from my cheek. "Play it for me one day."

"Okay." He hands me a folded sheet, but I push it back towards him. "No, they're yours."

"They're ours," he states and gestures for me to take it.

I unwrap the letter with shaky hands, and swallow hard at the sight of a crayon-drawn rainbow cake with six candles. I flip the page over, displaying the image to him. "You drew this for her, for her birthday. She didn't get a cake that year. She didn't get a cake most years."

His brows weave slightly. "Please stop talking about yourself in third person."

"That isn't me anymore, Konnor. Please, this is hard enough."

"Well, I feel like him, especially with you here, the way we were together." He strokes my hair and runs a finger along my jaw. "I remember some things."

"What do you remember?"

"I remember everything about you. I remember certain days, specially the days you didn't visit me. And I remember the last day. I could never forget that day, Blesk."

More guilt slithers up my back. I know *exactly* why he remembers the days I didn't visit.

*It was my fault he was forgetting in the first place.*

We both jump at the sound of a phone ringing. Konnor retrieves the cordless handset from its station on the kitchen bench.

“Hello?” He turns to face me and leans on the counter, crossing his ankles in front of him. “I’m okay... Yes, that’s fine, send her up.”

*Please don’t be, Pembie.*

He smiles at me with the kind of love in his eyes that I’m not ready to accept—the kind I may never be able to accept. “Thanks, Adolf.”

I stand up. “I have to make a few calls.”

“To who?” he asks, putting the phone down.

I gulp because I know he won’t approve. “The hospital.”

“Fuck that!”

“Konnor, he’s my brother.”

“No, he isn’t! Blesk, what the hell? He was...” He growls and strides over to me, running both hands down my arms and gripping my hands when he reaches me. His eyes narrow and cut into mine. “Has this happened before?”

Yes.

Ashamed, I stare at the floor evasively. “No, not like that.”

His lip twitches, and his eyes turn to slits. “Like... how?” he demands.

*He’s furious.*

A knock breaks through the tangible intensity around us, and I wave his hands off, needing some space.

*What will Konnor think of me if he knew I let Erik have my body for all those years?* Konnor couldn’t possibly understand how much I owe Erik for all those nights he listened to me cry and was my only comfort, for every nightmare that followed finding me bleeding out in the bathtub. He still gets them. He was only twelve when he found me. Konnor’s eyebrows furrow, and he appears equally as pained as he does livid. Whoever’s outside knocks again.

“This conversation is not over,” he mutters before walking over to unlatch the chain.

Elise bounces in with a paper bag. “Donuts?” She forces a beaming smile, but the worry in her eyes is undeniable.

“Please come in,” Konnor jokes as she shoves past him.

She rushes over to me, and we embrace tightly. She rests her head on my shoulder as we revel in the comfort of each other. I hear Konnor moving



across the apartment, but my eyes are shut tight.

Elise murmurs cautiously in my ear, "Wanna go out to talk?"

I open my eyes and look at Konnor's face. "No, we can talk here."

Elise releases me and waves the bag in her hand. "Donuts?"

"Do you want a drink, Elise?" Konnor appears almost sheepish as he collects a tumbler and a bottle of liquor from the kitchen cabinet.

Elise frowns at him. "It's nine a.m., Konnor."

"Yep, it sure is." He gestures towards the couch, and adds, "Take a seat." Elise moves to the sofa and sits down, glaring at Konnor as he tilts the glass to his lips.

"Konnor, what the hell happened yesterday?" Elise asks.

Konnor shifts his feet, and murmurs before answering. "Elise, I'm so sorry you had to see that." He lowers his head and shakes it slowly. "I have... I don't know what else to say."

"What happened?" She looks questioningly at him. "Please, I had to take two showers last night. I was completely covered in blood. I deserve to know." Her voice is steady, given the situation, but I can tell she is struggling to remain calm. Konnor paces over to console her, but she steps back and puts her hands up. His face falls deeply affected by her reaction.

He grips his nape and drags his fingers through his hair with a low growl. "Elise...I'm so sorry. I'm not a dangerous guy."

"Really?" she says dubiously. "Yep, okay. I believe you, it's just, you weren't the one holding *Erik's face* together." Konnor winces, then turns to me for support.

My breath lodges in my throat, and my legs give way. I sink onto the couch. "Elise..." I choke on the words, because they are hard to articulate. Harder to hear, I imagine. I cast Konnor a quick pleading glance, asking him with my eyes to tell her because I can't get the words out.

He inhales for courage. "Erik was hurting Blesk."

She flashes her wide-eyed gaze to me. "Hurting you how?"

*I don't want to say it. God, no, I don't want to hear it either.*

Every part of me wants to rush for the door again and never come back. Konnor is seated beside me before I realise he had even moved, and his arms quickly envelop my shoulders. He seems to read me like a book. "Duchess," he whispers, nuzzling into my hair. "It's okay." I nod and his warmth filters through to me, settling my nerves.

"Guys, what is going on?" Elise asks.

“Erik raped Blesk,” he states, squeezing me closer to his chest.

*Yep, harder to hear.*

“*He what?*” She glides over to us and hugs my waist from behind, so I am enclosed in a Konnor and Elise sandwich. I feel her and Konnor grip each other’s arms and rub them affectionately, and that small action affects my heart so profoundly. For a while, we all just cuddle, with their arms holding me between them and my head against Konnor’s firm chest. In this moment, I have the urge to tell Elise everything, to share my story, our story. I’ve never wanted to tell anyone, ever. The fabric from Konnor’s shirt brushes my chin as I peer up at his expression. His eyes are shut, engrossed in the feeling of me in his arms, so I take a few seconds to enjoy the smell and sight of him.

“Konnor?” I whisper. A flutter fills my chest when his lovely green eyes open and find mine staring up at him. “I want to tell Elise.”

He nods and smiles once before saying, “So do I.”

“So do I,” Elise says jokingly.

“Blesk and I . . . we know each other. Like, from when we were children.”

Elise frowns. “Okkkkkaaaaay?”

“I don’t remember a lot, because I was lied to all the time.” Elise sits opposite me with a donut in her hand and an anxious look on her face. He fills up his glass and walks to sit beside me, grasping my knee with his strong, tender hand. At no point in time did I ever want to tell anyone my story, his story. My father, my mother, Erik, they already knew. I should find comfort in having someone to share it with. But I don’t. Sharing this story, sharing my past, means accepting it. I don’t want to do that. I did terrible things, and one day I will have to stare into his striking green eyes and watch as they reflect loathing back at me.

He sculls back the contents of his glass and clears his throat. “Dutch courage.” He feigns a chuckle, and then says, “I was taken from my parents when I was five.”

Elise blinks at him. “You were kidnapped?”

“Yeah. I don’t actually remember the night it happened, and I’m not sure if most of the things I do remember are actually my memories, or if they are from reading articles or hearing stories from other people. The last few years are a bit clearer. Obviously, I was older. The first few years are

nearly completely lost. That place you saw yesterday . . .” He pauses and takes a moment to gaze upon my face. “I was locked in there for a while.”

“How long?” Elise hesitates on the question.

“A long time,” Konnor sighs. “Four years.”

Elise gasps, her hand flying up to cover the noise escaping. A little whimper breaks from me, and he squeezes my knee tighter, soothingly. Our story is a nightmare, the worst kind. I watch Elise watching Konnor intently.

“My brain was always foggy, is foggy, from the lack of sun, vitamin D, I don’t know what it was, but I was sick, I don’t remember specifics. Liz...”

*He was never sick.*

I shudder in response to the name I’d fought to forget, and *almost* had until recently. He stops talking and stares at me, brushing a rogue blonde tendril off my shoulder. “You okay, Duchess?”

Although that pet name is sweet, I know he’s just avoiding calling me Blesk. “It’s not your name,” he’d said. Well if the alternative is Liz, then Duchess it is. I choke down the huge knot that has slowly been expanding in my throat.

“Yes, I’m okay,” I finally say. Elise’s anxious eyes bounce between Konnor and me.

With a heavy sigh, Konnor continues, “It was Blesk’s biological father who took me. Liz and I were both so young and really only knew what we were told, believing things we shouldn’t and imagining things that never happened.

I find it hard to separate my fantasies and dreams from reality. Liz was younger than me and used to bring me meals. She was my maid, my best friend, and then she was my everything. She still is. Once her was caught, he never told the police why he took me. He just pleaded guilty and there was little-to-no trial at all. After I was found I was put up for adoption, because my biological dad thought it’d be better for me to get a fresh start, and my biological mum had died a few years earlier. It was all over The District news for years, so it was decided that a new name and family would probably be for the best.”

“Four years,” Elise mutters, shaking her head in disbelief. “You’re so . . . normal.”

“*Yeah, right, I’m really* not. I drink like a fish,” he says, glancing at the empty tumbler. “I lose my shit in confined spaces, I struggle with lots of

stuff, Elise. I'll tell you, though, I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for my adoptive family. They went through hell with me for those first few years, but they got me a shrink, loved me like their own, and gave me pretty much anything I wanted."

I choke down my tears. I just haven't had time to process this, and hearing it out loud, from Konnor's mouth is too much. He spins to face me straight on, and touches my cheek, rubbing his finger over my lower lip as it trembles. "I won't continue if this is too painful. Maybe go see Adolf, or go out on the balcony, while I tell Elise."

"No," I say. "I want to be here, it's just hard hearing this stuff, Konnor." I sniffle. "I don't know how you talk about it with such—"

Konnor's finger goes to my lips, cutting me off. "Duchess, I've spent hours talking about this with my family and my shrink." He blows out a long breath before turning to meet Elise's line of sight.

"Blesk feels differently about this. She always did. But that little girl kept me alive and gave me hope. When you have nothing, what you do have becomes *so much* more precious. That sweet voice and golden hair that reminded me of the sun. Without it, I would have forgotten what that colour looked like. I called her my sunshine, and that is exactly what she was."

## TWELVE: Konnor

When he gets riled up, he usually spits.

“Fuck you, Slater! You missed the last two practices and now you wanna play?” he grumbles, spraying me in my face with his saliva. With his shitty breath and snapping jaw, he adds, “You’re a real piece of work! Ya know that? Mess with my time, and now you show up like nothing happened.”

Nodding cheekily, I speak through my mouth guard, “Yes, Coach. Sorry, Coach.”

“Well, fuck you! Sit on the bench. Maybe I’ll bring you in later.”

I frown at him. “You need me out there! You can’t put David on the wing!” I yell, aggravated and pumping with adrenaline that’s completely rugby-unrelated. I gesture disdainfully towards the clumsy tool taking my position on the field.

He flips me off. “Fuck you, Slater. David is reliable—*he’s* been here week.”

*What an asshole.*

“Fine!” I saunter over to the bench, slam my body down, and chew on my guard. I glare out at the field, revelling in the smell of freshly mowed grass, and the sounds of the lads rumbling. I really need to play; the past two days have drained me emotionally, and I need a release from my thoughts.

Blesk and Elise will probably still be asleep. I really wish she had slept in my bed and let me hold her. Goddamn it, I don’t want to go another night without her next to me. When I woke up spooning her yesterday, with her perfect curves fitted snugly against my body, her feet tangled with mine, the smell of her hair in my face, and our fingers threaded under her cheek, I remembered this whole other side of me. A better side. Her presence was like a breath of fresh air, and I hadn’t realised until that moment that I’d been suffocating without her. Then those beautiful, wide, brown eyes

peered innocently up at me from my pillow... and it all faded away. I had to do a double-take before I realised her face told me a silent *goodbye*. It was fleeting and diluted, but I saw it.

That was the first time I saw it. Then, when she thought she was alone with her thoughts, I watched her from the doorway, watched her face fall and terror fill her expression. She wasn't happy to see me. A little bit of that air was squeezed from my lungs, and panic ran through me, filling my head with scenarios of losing her, *again*. The third time was when she made every inappropriate muscle in me pulsate at the mere sight of her wrapped in my towel. Her long blonde locks were wet and wild. When I saw her glistening naked thighs, all I could think about was them straddling my waist.

Her freshly reddened cheeks made me imagine her under me, kissing me madly, with those plush pink lips I'm *still* dying to taste. I had to look away, feeling completely wrong to want her after what she just went through. Hints of that farewell flashed in her face throughout the day, but I will be damned if I let her run away from me. Not now. I just want to play rugby so I can have a few hours of peace. Anything to keep my mind off the image of them together.

"Get on that field, Slate. If David wasn't such a complete waste of space, you would be benched for weeks." Coach grabs my jersey and drags me up before fisting my hair and tilting my head to stare at him. "Don't piss me off today."

"Yes, Coach!"

I jog out to join Jax and the lads on the field, flexing my neck, cracking my jaw, and jumping up and down to limber up. I spend a few moments sizing up the arseholes around me, and after a good amount of time on the sidelines, I know who I can dominate. There is one guy I haven't seen for a while on the opposing team, Max Butcher. Last time I saw him, he was playing for The Wedges at Connolly High. We both grew up in The District, however, his mates were never the kind I wanted to associate with.

Built like a brick shithouse, and fast like a mother-fucking six-legged cheetah. I will have to keep an eye on him. I pump the air and stretch, thinking about a million things: Blesk and her personal brand of perfection; Liz; how good Erik would look without appendages; what I'm going to do when I graduate, how to stop my little sister Cassidy from attracting the wrong kind of guys... kissing Blesk. Then the whistle goes, and I eyeball

the captain as Jacob feeds the ball into the scrum. I feel extra twitchy, and I just want to run. As soon as Jonno has the ball, and my feet start pounding the turf, I think about only a few things.

*The ball. Their defence. The line.*

It's like dodgeball, but instead of dodging balls I am ducking and weaving through incoming brick walls with fucking arms. It is a good thing I'm fast. Now Flex has the ball, and I am panting while my whole torso drags me forward to make sure I catch it on release. He tosses the ball, and I feel the thud of the leather against my chest. The ball is in my hands. My fists ache momentarily, but now I have only one thing on my mind.

*The try line.*

My eyes dart around checking the incoming traffic, and I dodge and swerve, jumping over the dickhead too inept to take me down. And now I have a clear run. My feet thunder the ground. But I'm a cocky prick, so I give the bleachers a shit-eater-grin before I dive, and drive the ball into the grass.

*Try, bitches!*

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"What a game, hey? Too bad they didn't put me in earlier," I state, smugly.

A small scoff escapes Jaxon, and I turn to grimace questioningly at him. "What's wrong with you?" I ask as we collect our clothes from the lockers.

He huffs. "A lot."

This room smells like bleach, and despite its fundamental purpose, I usually leave feeling like I need another shower.

I wander over to him and put my hand on his shoulder. "Thank you."

He tenses and tightens his features disapprovingly. "That was fucked up!" He slams his locker shut.

*My knuckles tend to agree.*

"That layer of fucked up is just the icing on top of a layered cake of fucked up. Trust me," I say.

He lowers his voice. "You gonna tell me what I saw down there?"

Offering him a regretful smile, I shake my head. "It isn't just mine to tell. Can you understand that? I mean, mate, I get it, you deserve to know,

but I can't tell you without Blesk's permission."

"You called her a different name and she freaked out." he states quizzically.

I take a long-exaggerated breath in and blow it out with as much ease as I can muster. "Yeah, because, we used to know each other, as kids, and I lost her, but..." I pause and contemplate my next set of words. "Now I found her. Her name was Liz then."

He shrugs at me. "Is that all you can give me?"

I nod apologetically and pat him on the back. "Yep."

"And Erik?" he queries.

I wince and tighten at the mention of his name. "Erik can go to hell... I promise if you knew what he was doing to her when I got there, you might not have pulled me off."

His face hardened. "I still would have. Even if it was just to stop you from going to jail."

"Just..." I pause. "Trust me? Please."

Jax's sighs. "Beer tonight?"

"I have to get Blesk. I have a few things planned, but maybe we will come by the hall after." After every home game, we host a postgame piss-up. We didn't win, but had I been on field for the whole game I claim we would have. Dealing with the hubris of the Preston Retreat University lads tonight would challenge all of our egos, and I have never missed a party; but Blesk is my number-one priority.

*Whether she likes it or not.*

The song she wrote when she was eight, "One Day," has inspired the plan I have for her, and by the time the sun drops behind the horizon, Blesk will be madly in love with me. I know her predisposition to run from complications. I know she is in constant turmoil over what happened. I am the living embodiment of that tragedy and memory, and with my presence comes pain. I know this. I don't want to cause her any pain. But we are worth the pain, worth the struggle, worth the fight. This is fate ... *us* presented on a silver platter. It's worth the effort, dammit! That little girl loved me, as much as I loved her and Blesk is retreating due to that familiarity. I won't let her. She needs to remember the love we shared, the joy we brought each other despite the darkness around us.

That song is about a promise we made to each other, that *one day* we would do all the things we never could, and that is exactly what we are



going to do today.

**Konnor:** Duchess, where are you at the moment?

**Blesk:** At home.

**Konnor:** Define home?

**Blesk:** You aren't my English teacher, Mr. Slater.

**Konnor:** Lol, your dorm or home-home?

**Blesk:** My dorm ☺

I scruff my still-damp hair with my hand as I approach the gargoyle-manned steps of her dormitory block. Several girls skip down the chipped concrete hazards to my side as I stride up.

"Konnor!" One of them calls out to claim my attention. I look around and my eyes land on a pretty, petite, blue-eyed girl from my class.

"Hey?" I search my memory for her name, clicking my fingers as if it's on the tip of my tongue.

Which it isn't.

"Willow," she gestures to herself with a sweet smile.

"Right! Willow, hey." I shove my hands into my pockets and look at her questioningly. "What's up?"

She turns to her girlfriends who have halted a few steps below us, and says, "Go ahead, guys. I'll meet you there."

She turns back to me, a little more flushed than I'm comfortable with, and says, "I watched the game today. My brother played nine, Jack Man."

"Right . . . yeah. It was a nice win," I acknowledge their accomplishment like the classy fucker I am.

She bats her eyelids at me, and I immediately think of Blesk, diverting my glance up towards the entrance. I'm not interested in a flirting session, especially not with a student of mine.

"You played really well," she coos. "My brother wouldn't stop talking about you on the way home. He said if Max Butcher hadn't been on field, you guys would have won."

"Yeah, Max is pretty aggressive. Well, that's a nice thing for your brother to say, so thanks, Willow. Congratulate him for me, will ya?" I try to be as polite as I can but feel increasingly impatient to get away and go up to look at those incredible brown eyes. "Sorry, but excuse me, I have to meet someone. Nice seeing you." I jog up the steps.

"Konnor!" she yells up to me.

*Take a hint...*

I roll my eyes and turn back to her with a feigned smile. "Yes, Willow?"

She twists a strand of hair around her finger. "Will you be at the party tonight?"

"Maybe." And with that I continue towards room seventy-three.

The carpets are ripped, the walls are narrow, and I know the rooms are poxy. Poor first-year university students. I knock on her door and wait, listening intently to the shuffling of feet on the opposite side. The door swings open and Blesk fills the doorway with a subtle grin, looking exceptional in jeans that hug her thighs and waist impeccably, and a black tank-top with butterflies on it. I sigh loudly, taking her all in. Every time I see her she is more extraordinary. The butterflies are appropriate because that's what she summons within me every time I see her.

"Duchess," I say and take her hand. "I hope you are free for the rest of the day because I have some things planned."

She angles her head curiously. "And what might they be?"

I immediately stiffen, because if I tell her, she might object. "An array of various activities."

"Intriguing... And worrying." She giggles.

*She just giggled. Fuck, yes.*

Her demeanour seems different from yesterday, more resolved. Maybe she just needed some time to absorb everything and Elise's presence and support obviously help. She seems visibly more at ease with her best friend around. I would be lying if I said I didn't wish I could make her feel that kind of contentment, but her feeling *that*, despite its origin, is enough for me, and I'm thankful to whoever can fill that void for her.

I grin at her. "So, is that a, 'Yes, Konnor, I will come with you, and engage in said various activities'?"

She chuckles again, and her eyes crinkle in the corners as she smiles sweetly. "Yes."

*She's going to be madly in love with me by the end of the day.*

"Awesome," I say with way too much eagerness to be cool, but I don't care. "But after, I'd like to meet Jax and the lads at the rugby party. Will you come?" She straightaway hesitates and begins to fidget with her clothes, so I grab her idle hand and pull it to my chest. "It'll be fun. I should go, and I don't want to go without you."

She nods. "O... kay," she says in that cute, mocking, adorable tone. "Did you win? Because I'd like to go to the party with a winner." Amusement plays on her face.

"Ohhhh," I bellow, laughter knocking at my chest. "My apologies, Miss Bellamy. You're going to have to go with a loser." Grinning and shaking my head in awe, I'm again amazed by the woman she has become, the funny, witty woman standing in front of me, smirking.

"Oh," she says, mock disappointment drawing her brows together. "I can't go then."

*Cheeky little thing.*

"Well, unfortunately I'm going to have to insist," I say, cocking my head at her. "And pull rank on you."

"What?" She gasps, faking shock. "Mr Slater, that seems like a personal request?"

"Well, *Custom Coaching*. Remember?" I pull her hand and begin to walk down the hall with her.

"Wait . . ." she says, tugging back on my hand, and parking her heels into the carpet.

I spin. "What?"

"I need a change of clothes for tonight." She grins at me like I should know this.

"You look great," I say. Which gives me another excuse to roll my eyes over her fantastic form, the slope of her breasts, the tiny slither of midriff, the little gap between her thighs. "Yep, looking good to me."

She smiles, tilting her head at my obvious perusal. "It's a party, Konnor. I need something else to wear."

"Okay, Duch, go grab something else. But don't worry, you'll still be the most beautiful girl at the party."

*Now who is the smooth motherfucker?*

She beams at me and rushes back into her room. As she bounds off, I watch her jeans stretch around her incredible arse, and I want more than anything to peel them off her, bend her over, and see what that arse looks like pressed to my pelvis. I want her, and my heart rate, imagination, and cock take every opportunity to remind me of that. But if she was half as beautiful, I'd still be just as persistent. That little girl made me feel like I was worth something, long after everyone else had forgotten me. It's a complete bloody bonus that the girl I've been in love with for most of my

life is the perfect mixture of classy, sexy, and sweet... an awesome bloody bonus.

Blesk skips out with a bag over her shoulder and a sweet grin from ear-to-ear. I grab the fabric strap of her bag and slide it off her shoulder, watching as it pulls the neck of her shirt down, exposing her soft naked collarbone. I turn and kiss the newly exposed part of skin and then hang her satchel over my shoulder. The taste of her skin makes every part of me vibrate, and that scent that is exclusively hers hits me like a wave of pheromones. She freezes and looks into my eyes as if shocked by my lips on her body.

"Sorry," I murmur, holding my hand out for her to take.

"Don't be," she whispers, feeding her fingers through mine. "Just wasn't expecting that."

"Good, 'cause I lied." I stick my tongue out at her. "I'm not sorry."

\*\*\*

When I was nine, two days before she died and before I lost her, we made a promise that has never been realized. We wrote down three things on a piece of paper that we wanted to do together in our new lives. The kind of things children dream about when they have nothing to stimulate or fracture their purest of desires.

When you are alone, when you spend hours looking into the black or being afraid of the man who is meant to protect you, your wishes become unique to that of a common child. There was a cage, is a cage, which consists of very narrow, cold metal bars, and they are so closely set together that even a finger struggles to move through the spaces between them. We used to index-finger swear. I would put my finger in between the bars, and she would meet mine with hers. That was the only human contact I had for four years. That's why it took me nearly two years before I could cuddle my new sisters and not feel awkward. However, once I felt their warmth, I've never taken *touch* for granted. If it was up to me, I would always be touching Blesk, touching Liz.

### **Promise #1 We will go on a Merry-Go-Round.**

The entrance is nothing if not grand, with its natural tree pillars that seem skyscraper-high, and the yellow flags that flap from various limbs.

Decades of work went into forming the trunk arches that act as a threshold into the maze made of hedges and oak. Blesk and I walk hand-in-hand through the dirt into the labyrinth. Children shoot past us, almost bowling us over, with water pistols and happy, cheeky faces. Other than the accompanying adults, we are the only ones over the age of twelve.

She grins at me and shakes her head like I'm crazy. "Where are we going?"

I point into the labyrinth as children whiz past, getting a mouthful of water from a nearby *Water Soaker*. "In there."

She laughs, and her smile is so beautiful. My heart feels too tight, too in awe of those lips and the way they curve. "Okay, let's go," she says, tugging me in.

When we hit the first green grass fork, she looks at me mischievously and says, "Beat you to the centre!" Then she disappears to the right, giggling as she bounces away. I duck off to the left, jumping over kids as they scoot around my legs. I halt in front of another fork: left or right? I dodge off right and sprint down a weird row of water fountains. Hopscotching over them and around a statue of a goblin, I suddenly reach a complete dead-end. She can't beat me. I shove what looks like a perfectly normal wooden wall in front of me. It opens.

As my feet jog carefully, attempting not to collide with any little people, I listen for any sign of Blesk. Then I hear her voice not too far away, but I'm in a tight hallway of hedges now. Kids sound riotous in this section of the maze, but their sudden absence around me seems eerie. Then I hear a splutter of laughter and I'm running, picking the directions by chance and following the noises. As I corner a grass mound, I come to a screeching stop, and find myself standing in front of it. Alone. Silent. It is as awesome as I remember

Goblins, unicorns, archers, and centaurs, all of which can be ridden, stand under the roof of the labyrinth's main attraction—the merry-go-round. I'm encircled by dark green hedges that are lit up by the colours beaming from the carousel.

The air is crisp and distinct as it blows through the channels and arches, and the silence seems to conflict with the vibrancy of the ride. I frown and wrinkle my nose as I dart my eyes around suspiciously. There is a strange nonattendance of children. The whole carousel is empty, shimmering and

waiting. There is only me halted in front of it. Then out of nowhere a kid appears and stares at me.

An abrupt chuckle escapes him. Then the kid pulls out his gun and squirts me in the face. My jaw drops as the noise of their feet surrounds me, quickly then followed by the contents of their pistols. Before I know it, I have a crowd of children running at me, spraying me with water. She appears from behind the carousel as her minions fly out and soak me.

She is giggling the kind of giggle that will flash in my mind the moment I take my last breath.

“You got here first, hey?” I yell to her and shake my wet hair like a dog.

Blesk sticks that tongue out and nods innocently. “Apparently kids will squirt anyone you ask them too.” She walks towards the rear of the carousel and grabs a pole twirled with ribbon to pull herself up onto the platform. Before I know it, she has swung her leg over a unicorn and is riding it, a big grin pulling her cheeks back. All the kids follow, filling spaces quickly. I jog up as the carousel begins to spin and jump on, moving around the objects to find a spot beside her. I sit on the side of a centaur paired with her unicorn and watch her smile at the eager and noisy children. She offers me her attention and, in that moment, looks so much like Liz that I fight the tears that are threatening to come out.

I mouth, “You’re beautiful.”

She blushes an exquisite colour of pink, and says, “So are you.”

### **Promise #2 We Will Dance Together**

Afterwards, I had the best and worst lunch date of my life—hot dogs from a street stall, which Blesk suggested. It was the best because it was without a doubt, the juiciest Italian hotdog I have ever eaten. The worst, because it was prepared by a guy named Kim whose wandering eyes on Blesk made me a little less fond of him. I wanted to take her somewhere with a view of the Stormy River, where a waiter would pull her seat out and treat her like a lady. But she just wanted a hotdog. . .

*I fucking love that.*

After a stroll hand-in-hand down the docks, watching her skip instead of walk, watching the sun flicker through her flowing hair, we head to our next destination. This is how I want every moment for the rest of her life to be—skipping before walking, laughing without consideration. We are not too far away, and this was my most risky of date ideas. Nothing too grand, or expressive, or private, but important to me.

One night while I was asleep, my sisters Cassidy and Flick discreetly woke me in bed, and all three of us climbed out my window. I was the middle child but acted like the youngest until I was about twelve. Losing four years of development will do that to a kid. What blew my mind was the *act* of climbing from the window, that there was a window to escape from, and to me it was a portal, a way into the world that no one could take from me. I used it often after that night. As often as I could. Not running, chasing, or escaping anything, just because... I could.

That night a friend of Flick's was busking down at the docks. They usually only went together, my new sisters. That night I officially became one of the *Slater* kids... they wanted me to be there and experience their harmless childish rebellion. Flick is the eldest of us three, sauntering instead of walking, swaying her hips and loving the attention she gets. She is a crazy, feisty, affectionate, headcase and I wouldn't have her any other way.

Cassidy is the youngest of us, adorable, but with so much weird energy. It was a beautiful night, with the smell of the ocean and the stars overhead. I played the brother role they cast me in, and it felt right. The girls bounced and teased me, but it was all just good fun. Their faces that night were filled with freedom, the pure kind one can only really appreciate when they've been stripped of it. Their hair rushing in the wind, silly faces, jumping on park benches, pushing each other and acting like exactly what they are—children. It is still one of the best nights of my life.

Today, I have taken my best friend... my everything back to the exact spot I *first* remember feeling true *freedom*. Dennis isn't here to play for us on the dock this time; but instead, we have some bohemian dude playing guitar. I sit and pull Blesk down with me. She shivers and I wrap my arm around her shoulder, rubbing her affectionately.

I study her face while she watches him and appreciates his talent, giving him the respect he deserves. Blesk is loving this. Her smile is content and sweet, and it makes my heart beat a little faster. I grab her hand and attempt to pull her out in front of the crowd, linking our fingers together and watching her eyes widen. She tries to park her heels into the ground and tugs away gently in protest. I lock eyes with hers and tilt my head slightly, pleading for her to trust me. Her body feels so soft beneath her shirt as I wrap my arm around her waist and pull her against me.

“Trust me,” I whisper as I begin to dance with her and... she lets me. It’s a weird rhythm to dance to, but we laugh, and I take responsibility for our inadequacies. I lead her and watch as her eyes shuffle through emotions like a deck of cards: nervous, excited, happy, sad, happy again, giddy, and the last could be mistaken for love. But if not, I’m getting close.

### **Promise #3 We Will Scream As Loud As We Can**

We watched the sun drop behind the horizon and then made our way back to my apartment. While waiting for Blesk to come out of the bathroom, I begin to feel nervous about her meeting the rugby lads. I swig on the bourbon in my tumbler, and the heat from the alcohol warms my body. I don’t have the most valiant reputation when it comes to women, and the last thing I want is some Arsehole saying something about my past indiscretions to Blesk. For her sake and mine. She isn’t just Blesk to me. Every time I look into her eyes I see glimpses of that fragile little girl looking back at me. I wasn’t able to protect her then—from her father, from her isolation—and it tore me apart. So now I will destroy anyone who does anything less than make her smile. I owe her that.

The door clicks open and my train of thought is immediately on hold. The sight of her slides pleasure through me not unlike the liquor in my hand, warming and soothing. She looks bashful, crossing her feet in front of her while I ogle every inch of her flawless appearance. Her little black dress clings to every curve, treading boldly on the edge of too short. There are little pink ribbons at the bust line, just to remind any guy who looks at her that she’s sweet. Her hair is pinned up loosely and every inch of porcelain skin from neck to breasts is exposed. I love that part of her body, it’s so delicate. Her pulse beats within her throat, and the need to kiss it is overbearing. Her heels are pink, with thin silk ties that wrap around her calf.

“Wow... Fuck, Duch. How am I meant to be a gentleman when you look like that?”

She giggles, rolling her shoulder up to hide her blushing cheeks.

“It isn’t funny. I’m serious.” I jump up, but I’m almost unsure if I should approach her yet. I want to peel that dress off her and watch every inch of her slowly become exposed. Then I want to taste every little dimple, curve, and soft portion of her skin, and then make love to her in those heels. I gulp and try to think about something else—my coach, the lady at the coffee shop with the whiskers . . .



“Do you want me to change?” she laughs.

“Hell no! I mean yes, I mean... no.” I walk over to her and peer down then kiss her forehead. “You look extraordinary.” She leans up and kisses my cheek. Her lips part slightly as they linger on my skin, and when she pulls away, our eyes lock inches from each other. I drop my eyes to watch her lips as she breathes, long, deep breaths that summon every part of me.

She pulls away to give us some much-needed distance and bats her lashes at me.

“You’re gorgeous, Konnor.” I’m standing like a statue. If I let so much as one muscle do what it’s pulsing to do, her breasts would be pressed against my chest, my tongue would be in her mouth, and I would be swallowing her moans. I shake my head and inhale. I thread my hand through her long fingers and we exit my apartment together. Adolf gives me a gracious smile as we stroll from the rear elevator across the foyer.

“Mr Slater, Miss Bellamy, enjoy your evening.” He raises his hat and tilts his chin.

Blesk beams at him. “Thank you, Adolf, and you, too.”

*I love how polite she is.*

I wait until we walk past and then turn, gesturing to Blesk’s back, and I cover my heart with my hand and smile. Adolf nods, mouthing, ‘*Look after her.*’

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The hall is technically off campus, however, it is walking distance from my apartment and most dormitories. By the time we get there its already buzzing with the lads, and a few of them are obviously already a little pre-partied. Probably started drinking at lunch time, not that I can judge since I take a flask with me almost everywhere, I go. Strangely, Blesk doesn't seem to judge me based on my drinking habits, which is usually the first thing girls share their objectionable opinion on.

We walk in, fingers thread together, and the first sign of trouble hits me square in the face. Pemberton scowls at us from across the hall with a look that would crush most men. She is wearing a red halter dress that screams *give me attention*, with a plunging neckline that flashes everything except nipple, and a slit up to the seam of her underwear. She looks hot. But Blesk

is hotter, there is no question. Curvier, softer skin, with a natural glow, and an authentic beauty. Pemberton was always too fake, inside and out.

I whisper under my breath, 'why the hell is she even here?'

Blesk's brows pull together. "Because she's in love with you, Konnor."

I nearly cough with laughter. "She doesn't love me, she hates me. I was an accessory."

She rolls her eyes. Sassy Blesk. I like Sassy Blesk. "Sometimes girls don't know how to show you that. She does. *I* can tell. Be nice to her, please." I want to tell Blesk what horrible things Pemberton said about her. Yet, I want more than anything for her to smile, so I never will. Even if it means I'm the bad guy.

"Alright I'll be nice, Duch," I say and run my knuckles down her cheek.

She blinks at me a few times. "Boys just don't get girl cues."

I shrug. "You're kinda enigmas." And then stroke her cute button nose with my index finger.

The night passes by and Blesk gets along seamlessly with everyone I introduce her to; she is charming and witty. Although her specific variety of perfection does attract irritating amounts of attention from a lot of Arseholes in the hall, she stays by my side, and she doesn't pretend to want to be anywhere else. She is rare. Our *togetherness* is rare. Taking manly sized gulps of my bourbon on the rocks and listening vaguely to the lads around us chattering, my gaze gets drawn to her. Her long delicate fingers clasp the stem of her white wine glass as she sips her drink modestly, and every time her lips wrap around the rim tingles run directly to my groin.

*Stop staring, Konnor.*

I'm slowly slipping into a nice inebriated state. My attention is short, and my temperament is becoming unpredictable. I am completely distracted by Blesk, her every graceful movement, her every little smile. It's probably because I've still yet to kiss her, and the anticipation of her and me, pressed together, is too much to handle.

"Slater? Slater!"

I get drawn back to the other people around me when through the fog in my mind I hear my name. "Huh?"

"You and that bloody phasing out thing. Freaks me out, dude, stop it." Jax grimaces at me. "Yeah, buddy, she's smoking hot. Stop drooling."

"Get fucked." I playfully shove him. Blesk giggles as we continue our immature, testosterone-based banter, and wraps her hand around my

forearm.

Someone from behind us shout, "I know that arse!"

Jax's face drops in response to whoever the voice belongs to, which inundates me with immediate unease. Every muscle in me tightens when I hear a slap. I know someone has just slapped Blesk on the arse. Her eyes widen, and her legs buckle noticeably beneath her.

I spin around, seeing nothing but red. "What the fuck?!"

*Fucking Max Butcher.*

He holds his hands up in a ceasefire kind of motion. "Whoa, no disrespect Slater, I've had a few too many." He smirks at me. "You know all about that."

I fist my hands at my side in preparation, but then notice Blesk smiling with recognition at him. The familiarity in her eyes unsettles me further. I don't want to think about him and her, or whatever kind of acquaintances they are. Or why she is smiling at him. *Why is she smiling at him?*

My brain starts to short circuit, the scowl etched on my face becomes painful, and my molars grind together.

"Hey, darlin', I forgot your name." Max grins at her, his lips lopsided and arrogant, and presents her with his hand. "Know that arse, just not the name. My bad." My eyes go directly to his hand, and I watch as she places hers delicately in it. Then his fingers wrap around and enclose hers within them, and maybe it's in my head, maybe I'm just too drunk, but it seems more sensual than necessary. My eye twitches. If I didn't know any better, I would be throwing my elbow into his jaw right now.

I fantasise about picking up the chair to my right and shattering it over his disrespectful head. The only thing stopping me from teaching him some manners is Blesk. She hates fighting. Any retaliation against Max would definitely end that way, resulting in me bludgeoned and him walking away with a few meagre scratches. That doesn't bother me as much as Blesk having to witness something like that again. She has a gentle heart; she always did. Despite that, if he puts his paws on her again, I won't be able to stop myself.

"Blesk. Erik Bellamy's little sister." She shakes his hand, and they linger on that gesture far too long. A deep rumble, like a growl, courses through my chest.

His face lights up with recognition, and he smirks while leaning back on his heels. "Ah... of course!" He pats me on the arm and I want to break that

hand. "Slater, I went to school with her dickhead brother."

He tilts his head to eyeball me and then folds his arms across his chest, peering down on me. "So, I hear you beat the shit out of him?"

*Fuck, news travels fast.*

Of course, Max is a District kid, too; we don't have any bloody private lives.

Blesk narrows her eyes at me and shakes her head. It's clear she doesn't want me to join in on this particular male banter. "Not something I'm proud of," I lie.

He palms his jaw until his teeth crack and scoffs, "Yeah, right." Then he pats me again like a dog, knowing I can't do a *single* thing if I want to keep all my teeth. "Been there, done that. Funny it's over the same girl, though." He snickers and slowly saunters off, whistling to himself for getting under my skin.

I turn, lock-jawed, and stare at Blesk with the calmest questioning expression I can muster. Every part of my face is on fire, akin to someone igniting a furnace behind my eyes. "*Funny it's over the same girl, though.*" "*Funny it's over the same girl, though.*" "*Funny it's over the same girl, though.*" **FUCK!**

"Blesk? Can you explain, please?" I barely get the words out without yelling.

Her face tightens at my tone and expression. Then her lips curve up and she smiles at me.

"Nothing happened," she giggles. "We kissed a little. Don't let him get to you. Max derives great pleasure from messing with people." Then she cracks up, laughing. "It's just a game to him."

*Max is messing with you. I hate the way she says his name.*

This jealousy thing is new to me, and it's nothing short of irritating. I rub her beautiful arm, and then turn to walk outside to get some air. My legs move faster than normal, and to a common observer, I probably appear to be rushing away from a fight. Perhaps I am. The fight is in my head, but still.

He's kissed her. There is this whole side of her life I know nothing about. How many guys has she been with? How many guys have kissed her? My Liz. My girl. She has this whole past that I hadn't even contemplated. I bum a cigarette off a friend and find a spot alone. I press the cigarette to my lips and replace carbon dioxide with nicotine. Then I

chase the ashy taste I dislike with the bourbon that's sloshing around in my glass.

"Hi?"

I tilt my head in the direction of the voice and rest it on the pillar behind me.

It's Willow. Her hair swirls in the wind, and her strut towards me is provocative. Her hips swing like a pendulum and the light from the hall is making her silhouette's movement way too stimulating to the guy who hasn't had sex in over a week. There are three of her right now and all three look... *good*. I try to stabilise myself by gripping the pillar behind me with one hand. "Willow, right?"

"Konnor, what are you doing outside, *all alone*?" she purrs.

"Getting drunk. You?" I mumble.

She bats her long lashes at me and coos, "Looking for someone to get drunk with." Willow's eyes sparkle as a slow sexy smile spreads across her face, and I could spot that look anywhere. That's the *fuck me look*.

*I am so drunk. I am so horny. Blesk...*

I straighten and walk away from her, ignoring her when she calls me back. I am way too drunk. I can barely focus on walking straight, let alone anything else. Once I see my Duchess, I begin to stumble in her direction. She smiles at first, then must have noticed the glazed look in my eyes and the irregular rhythm of my feet, because she rushes over to me, wraps her arm around my waist and walks with me outside. She helps me down onto the step before positioning herself beside me with a little sigh.

She places her hand on my leg and peers at me. "You okay?"

My elbows meet my knees, my head hangs between my legs, and I focus on breathing. "When did I get so drunk?"

She giggles and rubs my leg. "You've been inhaling drinks since we got here."

"Blesk, Duch, I'm freaking out. About Max. About you. About us."

"I'm twenty. I've kissed boys, Konnor."

"How many boys?" I comb my fingers through my hair, and rub my temples, feeling tightness through my forehead.

*I don't want to know... yes, I do.*

She sighs, her warm breath bringing colour to the crisp air. "Ummm, maybe six."

"Not me," I huff before I can stop the words from coming out.

*Don't talk to her like that, dickhead.*

"I'm sorry, Duch. Sometimes I'm an Arsehole when I'm drunk."

There is silence beside me while I stare at the pavement, shuffling the dirt with my sneakers. I'm glad I can't see her face right now, it seems to undo me, and if I saw even a glimpse of hurt in her eyes in response to my previous tone, I would want to rip my own head off. And I need my head.

*Despite my lack of knowing how to use it sometimes.*

I look up at her. "Duch?"

Her lips curve up slowly as she asks, "Do you want to kiss me?"

I hold my breath for a second and then release it in a rush. "God, yes!"

She moves her head closer to me and her breath hits my lips. The smell of peaches overwhelms my senses. "Like this?" she whispers. "Now?"

Sitting up I grab her nape, and pull her into me, brushing my mouth along hers. A small gasp escapes her, and she waits, letting me take complete control. Our lips barely touch, but her panting matches mine. I want to kiss her. I also want to remember it.

*You're too drunk, Konnor.*

I watch her line of sight drop to see my hand entwining with hers, and then I pull her up. I stagger a little. She catches me around the waist, laughing. Then we walk, stumble, stagger, jog, whatever you want to call it, towards the middle of the field that surrounds the hall. It's damn cold. I pull off my jacket and wrap it around her shoulders, covering the tiny amount of fabric she has over her. As I slump down onto the grass with a loud exhale and pull her down with me, she leans into me with a sigh.

"I'm not used to feeling jealous," I admit, attempting to explain my behaviour. "If a girl doesn't want me, well, then, whatever." I smirk at her. "Not that it's ever happened."

"So modest," she says with a giggle.

We stare up at the stars sparkling and glistening in the black dome above us. Our breath steams the air and the scent of freshly mowed grass fills my nose. Besides the subtle drumming and murmuring coming from the hall to our side, there is no noise, no presence or person other than us. We share several comfortable moments of silence and listen to the sounds of each other breathing. Her hair is still pinned delicately above her head, and when she turns to stare at me, her eyes are heavy-lidded; she may be a little drunk too. The urge to touch her is too strong. Her neck, and chest are

exposed and covered in goose bumps, and I'm crazy in love with that section of her skin.

Flipping onto my side, I memorise the curves of her torso with my fingers, trailing the beating vein in her neck, towards the dimple where her collarbone meets her chest, and over the fleshy mound where the fabric of her dress meets her breasts. She swallows hard, but lets me study her, touch her. I want to tuck my hand into her bra and squeeze, feeling her nipple tighten in my palm. She quivers beneath my fingers, and I love that I can make her body respond that way. I look up from where my finger lingers on her plump chest, to meet her sexy glistening eyes, and the breath is squeezed from me.

*Fuck.*

*I want her so bad.*

"Thank you," she whispers, smiling coyly, "for today. It was... *perfect*."

Her words fill my heart. "I want every day to be perfect for you," I say. "But it isn't over yet." I roll onto my back and twist my face to look at her, focusing my thoughts to our final promise. "Scream."

Her face tightens. "What?"

"Scream," I state. "It's on our list."

She looks at me with wide hesitant eyes and shakes her head over and over. "No way." I chuckle and turn to the sky, then howl excessively loudly up to the moon. She slaps me in the stomach and laughs. Her body vibrates with the sounds of joy.

"You're so corny." She curls onto her side, watching me watching her. "Go on, Duch, do it," I press, pulling her legs off the grass so they drape over me.

"O... kay," she mocks in that silly tone I adore. Her hand rests on my chest as she answers my call with a much cuter howl. "Howw Howw Howwwwwwwlllll!!!"

## THIRTEEN: Liz

The girl glares at her reflection, wondering at what age she will be beautiful. She glances at the photo of her mother stuck to the side of her mirror and then back to herself. Her hair is always a nest woven together like barrels of hay, strands dead on the ends. She narrows her eyes, turning to the side to see if she has developed yet. Nothing. With a sigh, she moves towards the mirror and opens her swollen eye up, tightening the skin around the bruise until her face appears slightly less puffy.

*Why can't I be beautiful?*

Lately the girl has felt strange. Different. She wants to look beautiful, and she wants Kon to say she is, even if she blushes, and tells him he's gross... she still wants to hear it. When she is at school, she thinks about him. She thinks about him all the time. The girl knows he can't wait until *he* is allowed to go to school, too. He loves the idea of learning. With education, he can be anything he wants to be. Not a dog. Anything he wants. When he was six, he pretended he was a firefighter. When he turned seven, he pretended to be an explorer, discovering things all over the world, like untouched mountains and desert scapes. When he was eight, he pretended to be a sports star running around under the sun on an oval made of green and gold. Now that he is nine he wants to make sure every kid can learn and be anything they want to be; he wants to be a teacher. The girl wonders what he will want to be next year...

She watches her bunny slippers slide across the floorboards, their floppy ears bouncing with each step. She giggles. She walks into the old kitchen and begins to make dinner. Three bowls first. Pasta. Cheese. Milk. Butter. The girl knows how to make a meal on a budget even though she is only eight. It has been her responsibility to prepare meals since she could reach the stove. Pasta is only fifty cents a bag and will feed four adults. It lasts a few days. She can get cheese and butter for only five dollars; they last a week. Milk is a luxury. The man at the deli gives her the expired stuff for



one dollar, however, she boils it up with the cheese and butter, and never has a problem. Her favourite meal is mac and cheese, and it only costs six dollars and fifty cents to make.

Mrs Renalds from two streets over lets the girl take a few cobs of corn during the season from her corn field. Kon loves sweet corn straight from the cob or in mac and cheese. The girl likes making him happy. He is her little secret—she knows something isn't quite right about their situation. It has been four years since he came to be her brother. Her father told her he was allergic to the sun and if it ever saw him then it would burn him to a crisp. The boy is safe in the cage, under the ground, away from the rays. She is safe, too. And they are together.

She remains silent and inconspicuous as she slides onto the brown futon and flicks the television on, desperately trying not to disturb the man who is passed out on the recliner with his highball clutched in his hand. She presses the mute button and switches the channel to the nightly news, peering at her father every so often to assess his state. He is snoring loudly. The girl wonders if all men snore. She isn't allowed to watch the news. Her dad says she has a soft heart and the news will corrupt her. She loves the news. The girl shovels the mac and cheese into her mouth, the sweetness of the corn exploding as she pops the kernels between her molars and watches the inaudible program.

Suddenly she is rendered frozen, shell-shocked by the images on the television. The girl all but stops breathing, unsure of what she is looking at. Or why her body wants to break apart. Or who she is looking at. Or who... Then she knows.

*His face.*

She blinks at the screen. His face. The girl sits up immediately and, without her conscious consent, her fingers rub the volume key until she can hear the voice speaking. A knot rolls down her throat. Her body tightens as she listens. And stares. At Kon's face on the television.

*"Nerrock Missing and Beyond is an annual charity event that raises funds to assist with services necessary when a child goes missing, including law assistance and travel,"* the voice says.

*"The boy who inspired this affluent event is none other than the famous Deakon Nerrock, son of Dustin and Madeline Nerrock, who went missing four years ago without a trace. Last year, just after the death of Madeline Nerrock, the charity CEO—"*

She still can't move.

*His face.*

*Kon.*

*Deakon.*

*Missing.*

*Why can't I breathe?*

She tries to suck air in, but something is stopping it. Then the girl realises her hand is tightly clasped over her mouth. She blinks at her brother's face and slowly unfolds her fingers. Air inflates her lungs in a rush, as she gasps at it. Heaves.

*His isn't my brother.*

*Thud.*

A rough hand slams into the back of her head, her neck wrenches forward, her vision dims, and she hits the floor, face crushed against the carpet. A metallic taste fills her mouth.

Like a snake suffocating its prey, her father's hand encircles her ankle, and the carpet burns her cheeks as she is pulled backwards along it. The girl knows what is happening, but she is too dizzy from his face, from the hit, from the truth, to react.

*He isn't my brother.*

Moments pass as she lies limp, being dragged into her father's room. Then she remembers what she heard: The truth about who he is and what her father has done. What *she* has done. A gut-curdling scream crawls up her throat. She begins to fight back. With her voice. With her cries. With her clenched fists and kicking legs. For the first time, she fights. For Kon.

## FOURTEEN: Blesk

I've never watched anyone sleep before. His eyes flicker around under his heavy lids, and his incredible mouth twitches every so often. I gently stroke his cheek then run my fingers through his hair. I study its exact shade. It's light brown, the perfect kind of brown that flashes natural highlights in the sun. His cheeks are a little stubbly, and I think I like them that way. I use my finger to smooth out the frown he has fallen asleep with, but it quickly forms again. He's a worrier.

We are sharing a pillow facing each other, our legs tangled together. We fell asleep talking. He babbled to me about his life, stories of snowboarding trips to Falls Creek, running amuck around The District when he was a teen, camping adventures, Bali holidays, and backpacking around Europe with a mate from New Zealand. I felt a sense of relief knowing his life has flourished.

He told me about the significance of the places he took me to yesterday, and all about Cassidy and Flick, and how they brought him out of his shell. He shared lessons the wise Ben Slater, his adoptive father, taught him, to help him learn from his past and use it to build strength in himself. He told me his mission is to make me fall in love with him, and that I don't stand a chance.

Funny, as if I'm an opponent. How could he know that I am? If only he were just Konnor Slater. Yesterday we finished Liz and Deakon's story together, and I played the part, and it was the most perfect day of my life. Yet when we went to sleep, and I heard him mumble, "I love you, Liz," as he drifted off, the whole truth of this reality came crashing down on me. He loves Liz. Not me. I don't want to be loved for another person, especially one I hate.

If only he loved Blesk, just Blesk. He doesn't know anything about me: how I go off the deep end, how I can't handle confrontation . . . how much his presence makes me dislike myself. He looks at me like I'm some kind of

mythical creature, and I'm not; I am just plain old Blesk. Blesk, who does more damage than good. When Konnor looks at me, his eyes are unwavering, and there is too much pressure in them. He talks like our forever is set in stone. He is too much and so are his expectations of me. I tried to be who he wants me to be, but I'm not Liz. More than that, I don't want to be. So, if being with him means being her, then I just . . . can't.

*Dearest Konnor,*

*Being with you is like living in a dream. Every moment we are together I feel like someone else. You are everything I dreamed you'd be, and then some. And most nights I did dream about you. Your life is beautiful and warm, just like you. There is nothing stopping you now from being everything you want to be. How you have taken yourself from that poor boy and turned into this man . . . You are a miracle. You're my hero boy, Konnor!*

*If I could be what my parents wanted me to be, then perhaps I could be with you. If I could be what you want me to be, then I could be with you. But I am none of those things. I am broken inside and I can barely manage to be a complete person. You deserve someone who can flourish with you in your amazing life, with your amazing friends and family. You don't have to have tragedy in your world anymore, Konnor. You are free of it! You got out! I didn't, and I will destroy all the progress you have made.*

*I am not her. Not anymore. It took me years to break away from her so I could live the remnants of a normal life, and when I am with you, she is all around us. She is in every look you give me. In every smile. You see her. Not me.*

*Yesterday was the greatest day of my life, and nothing will ever change that.*

*I promise you will thank me one day.*

*I'm sorry.*

*XO,*

*Blesk*

This point in my life right now, as I exit Konnor's apartment building after leaving him asleep with a note under his alarm clock, is the lowest. Tears stream out from under my sunglasses as I stride back towards my

campus dormitory. Needing something other than the conflict torturing my mind to stimulate me, I call Elise.

“Wally, my sweet, sweet, crazy, Wally, what’s up?” She answers with a lot of pep and I love her for that.

Saturday night we spent hours watching chick flicks, including *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. I told Elise about the significance of that movie, our movie, and our friendship. She loved it. She has been calling me Wally ever since because according to her I make silly decisions. We also talked a lot about Konnor. She said it was a fairy-tale romance, and that most girls could only ever dream of such a love. And perhaps that’s true. Most great romances are a mixed genre, mystery —and tragedy.

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“I just ended things with Konnor.” Silence. Crickets. I can imagine her face.

She sighs. “Are you being a Wally, Wally?”

I hail a taxi and cross the street to meet it in the strip lane, putting my phone momentarily in my pocket. I speak through the window, “St Bernard’s Hospital, please.” He nods and gestures to the backseat.

“BLESK! DO. NOT. GET. IN. THAT. TAXI!” I hear Elise’s strangely articulate yell coming from my handset.

Putting the phone back to my ear, I prepare myself for the impending disapproval. “I need to check on him.”

I hear a displeased huff escape from her. “Not without me. I’m walking out now. I have a class at ten and so do you, so we *will* be back by then. What the hell? *Why* would you break things off with Konnor? He adores you!”

“He’s too good for me. He doesn’t adore me; he adores that little girl. She was pure, and I’m damaged goods, trust me. There is no way—”

“I know you feel like it was your fault, but it wasn’t. You were a child, Blesk! There is no way it is your fault,” she chimes in with a hint of exasperation.

“He’s too good for me,’ I insist. “I am a complete head case. I swear, I’m protecting him. He will realise one day when it’s too late that I’ve been

a drain on his life.” A sigh filled with pain and regret escapes me. “Just like I was for Er—”

“*Oh my God*, if you say Erik, I swear I will tit punch you.”

A small chuckle fills my throat. “Well, I won’t say that name then. That sounds painful.”

“How did he take it? *Oh God*, I’m not even sure I want to know.”

I gulp before I answer her. “I left him a note,” my voice breaks, “while he was asleep.” My belly twists. Running has become such a natural response for me. I face-palm myself.

“*Oh. My. God.* I am not judging you but, *oh my god.* He’ll be crushed.”

My phone beeps with a second call. I peer down at the name flashing intrusively: Konnor. Shame and guilt surge through me.

*Bitch.*

I raise my phone back to my cheek and breathe out loudly. “Konnor’s on the other line.”

“Pick it up. talk to him!” she pleads.

“I can’t.”

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It is no wonder people hate hospitals. They intrude on every sense and are filled with people who avoid you when you need them most. The receptionist has a permanent scowl on her face, and my appearance in front of her further etches it into her features.

“Hi, I’m Blesk Bellamy,” I say as sweetly as I can. She doesn’t even look at me. Glass separates us and phones ring relentlessly. She picks up a phone, yells into it, slams it down, writes something, picks up another phone and yells into that one. And so it continues. I glance at my phone: ten missed calls from Konnor. I flick through my texts.

**Konnor:** Don’t do this Blesk... It’s you I want! You! Please call me. Just talk to me about all of this, tell me what you want me to do. I will do it. I will do anything!

**Konnor:** Maybe I came on too strong. I will wait as long as you need... just call me. Please don’t block me out.

My heart is weak. I focus intently on forcing the absence of feelings.

"I'm here to see Erik Bellamy," I murmur, bobbing my head at the receptionist, trying to gain her attention.

She rolls her eyes and tilts her head towards me then slams down the phone once again. "Yes, I know. Wait and I'll tell you his room number."

And with that I sink back into my chair.

"Wally!" I hear a familiar voice call out, and I am instantly filled with relief.

Elise slides into the chair beside me, wearing hipster jeans and crazy nail polish. "Excuse me, Miss?" She taps on the window that separates us from the hospital staff.

The nurse, or receptionist, or whatever she is, turns to us with a crushing glare and grumbles, "Don't touch the glass!"

"I. Am. Sorry." Elise tilts her head. "What exactly is your job? Are you a receptionist? Or a clerk? Or an assistant? Are you the deputy of business relations? Well, we just need a number. *One* number—Erik Bellamy's room number—and then we'll be gone and you'll never hear from us again. Or we can sit here, waiting, and get extra—"

"Room thirty-nine, Karri Ward!"

With that, we leave and try to navigate our way through the hospital. When we arrive at Erik's door I stare at the threshold between me and the beeping and pumping sounds of room thirty-nine.

"Are you going to go in?" Elise asks delicately.

I grip her hand and clear my throat before walking in with steady, cautious steps. When I look at him, I am utterly lost for words. Erik is usually so tall, such a big prominent man, with such confidence—he is just so tall. Fidgeting with everything, my hair, my clothes, Elise's bag, I move to stand beside his bed. He doesn't look big, or tall. He looks *small*. When I try to touch his hand, a something rubber presses against my palm. I pull away almost instantly. A canula. He also has a horrendous-looking tube jutting out from his throat. I study his face and all the new colours, dark reds and blues from deep bruising, and greens and yellows from ones that have started to heal. Tears make their ways to my eyes, demanding release.

"Only family is allowed in here!" I hear from behind me.

I jump. "Hi," I say. "I'm his sister. "Is he okay?"

He peers at me. "Are you family?"

"I just told you. I'm his sister."

He paces around the room, checking the equipment and making notes on the medical chart in his hand. Then he stops in front of me, scrutinising my expression. I feel fuzzy in this room, with the bleeping and the humming.

“Mr Bellamy is in serious but stable condition. He has already been to theatre.” His tone is pointed.

I blink at him in the midst of what has become a deafening silence. I blink again. Time is strangely slow. Or I am slow. Or he is slow.

Elise grips my hand and squeezes. “What happened in theatre?” I hear her say through my fog.

“We wired his jaw shut and reconstructed parts of his face. Due to the severity of his injuries and the possibility he has bleeding on the brain, it was recommended he be induced into a coma to give him time to heal. Of course, he needed ventilation, so we gave him a tracheotomy, he’s on IV fluids, and is being monitored hourly.”

“How long will he be under for?” My voice sounds mousy.

“Probably about three weeks.” He narrows his emotionless eyes at me.

“He needs plenty of time to heal. This *is* a big deal, girls, and keeping secrets is a bad decision.”

*What is it they know?*

*Or suspect happened to Erik.*

“Okay, we’d like some time alone now,” Elise almost snaps at him.

I’m staring at the ground, but I can hear his shoes shuffle as he moves through the door. “What happens if there’s bleeding on the brain?” I squeak out. But he is gone.

“Why was he so mean?” I cry, collapsing onto the chair beside my brother.

Elise exhales and moves to stand beside me. “When we brought him in, I refused to tell them what happened. Let’s just say, they weren’t impressed.”

I peer up at her. “You lied?”

“No,” she states. “I just decided I wanted to know what happened first. I saw the way you and Konnor broke down. I mean, he called you Liz and you *freaked* out. I knew I wasn’t ready to talk about what happened.

We have both set ourselves up in room thirty-nine. Elise is at the desk with her laptop open, and I am sitting cuddling my knees on the seat next to *Small* Erik. Thankfully Elise refused to leave until I do and had emailed all



our grad-tutors to alert them about our absence this entire week, due to "personal reasons." One of the grad-tutors emailed was Konnor Slater.

Pulling out my phone, I press the lock button down till the handset goes black. The guilt of being here after leaving Konnor mixed with the guilt of what I have reduced Erik to, is almost too much to handle. I know I shouldn't be here. But part of me is here for Erik, and part of me is here because I knew Konnor wouldn't be, so I can hide. My head is so messed up right now, swarming with wrestling emotions.

I jump up when the door swings open. But my entire body relaxes at the sight of a large stubbly fifty-year-old man, with a solid build and generous girth that is the result of his love of wine. My dad.

"Kitten," he says, stretching his arms to me.

My feet take me to him without my conscious permission. I bury my face into his chest, just as tears begin to fall.

He kisses the top of my head. "Don't cry." His arms tighten protectively around me as he exhales a long, agonising breath.

"Hello," he says to Elise, while he strokes my hair and rests his cheek on my forehead. "I'm Blesk's dad, Jasper." Sinking into his chest, I look at the picture on the wall, not quite ready to be released. There is no cuddle in the world that feels as genuine as the ones my dad gives me.

*Konnor's are just as amazing.*

"Nice to meet you, Mr Bellamy," Elise says nervously.

"No, no, just Jasper is fine," he states, worry painfully evident in his voice.

"Okay. Nice to meet you, Jasper."

"I hear you brought Erik in. What happened?"

The picture stays the same, yet the intensity in the room becomes palpable, thickening and separating us from each other. There is an awkward pause. Poor Elise; this is only her problem by association.

*We can't tell him about Konnor, we just can't.* My brain tells me to answer for her, to intercept the question, but when my mouth starts to move, my voice is suddenly held captive by fear.

"I'm not sure, Jasper. I didn't see much," Elise answers uncomfortably.

My dad grasps my shoulders and pulls me away from him, forcing me to look at him. "Blesk? Are you okay, baby girl?" I nod. "Tell me what happened?"

I focus on my breathing and speak delicately, while trying to also project a sense of finality in the answer. “Erik got into a fight. You know how he can be.”

He arches his brow sceptically. “The doctors seem to think you two know something, Kitten.”

I shake my head and drop my gaze to the floor, shuffling my feet nervously and fidgeting with my nails. “No.”

He lifts my chin, snagging me in his line of sight. Solemn, distraught eyes stare back at me—losing another member of his family would break him. “Blesk, this is serious. Tell me who did this to your brother.”

Ever suspicious gesture slices at my insides as hopeless tears trace the contours of my cheek and fall down my trembling lip.

*This is all my fault, all my fault.*

If I had just stayed away from Konnor he wouldn’t be hurting right now, Liz would still be buried in a closet in my mind, and Erik wouldn’t be so *small*. I can never tell my dad. I can never tell anyone. Not what Erik did to me and not what Konnor did to Erik.

I search my mind for the right thing to say, shuffling various versions of the truth around in my head like puzzle pieces, seeing which bits form a picture with the least consequences.

“I don’t know who it was.” When the words come out, their deceit strikes sickness into my soul. He looks at me with heavily disappointed eyes. I’ve never lied to my dad before.

Time rushes by, and I am strangely detached.

Shortly after my father arrived, the police came and asked me and Elise a lot of questions. We feigned ignorance, both agreeing that the attacker was a stranger. I got the impression they didn’t believe us.

They asked my father if he wanted to press charges, subsequently opening a case for further investigation. I was surprised and relieved when he reluctantly said no. I’m not sure if it was for me, or because he didn’t want the police poking around Erik’s personal life. The police are used to this kind of dissonance from residents of The District; we lost faith in their authority many years ago. They don’t control that area: we know it and they know it.

At midday, we had lunch, while I sat in the chair by *Small* Erik. At 2:00 p.m. I tried to study for *Musical Harmony 445*. I am not sure what I read.

My eyes went over the words and the sentences, but nothing actually penetrated my mind.

The doctor spoke to my dad at 4:00 p.m. and a few words registered, *coma, damage, brain, police*. Elise left at 5:00. When she returned at 6:00 with a change of clothes, I still hadn't moved. At 7:00 we ate dinner. I think I moved the food around the plate, I may have even tasted some, but I'm not sure what it was.

At 8:00, I switch my phone on and check my text messages.

**Konnor:** You aren't coming to class? Do you hate me that much? Damn it, Duch, you are fucking me up!

**Konnor:** I'm sorry for swearing at you, Duchess. I'm sorry. I should never do that. Just talk to me.

**Konnor:** Alright, Blesk, alright, just remember I'm here. If anyone ever hurts you. If you ever need a ride, a cuddle, a bodyguard, a friend, a servant, a wizard, lol. Anything. I'll be there for you.

**Konnor:** This is not happening. It can't.

**Konnor:** Just stop fucking running! Seriously, this is bullshit.

**Konnor:** Sorry again for swearing at you. Please just talk to me.

I clutch my heart with my hand and count to ten in an attempt to steady my urge to scream from the ache within it.

*Guilt. Pain. Bitch.*

## FIFTEEN: BLESK

“Duchess,” he purrs into my ear, nuzzling my neck. His heated breath floats down on me like a feather leisurely fluttering over my skin. Each subtle tingle, each little caress, each warming sensation, causes my toes to curl and my back to arch with wanting. Little moans escape my mouth, and he hasn’t even touched me yet. His body comes down on top of me gently, and I sink into the mattress with the weight of him.

“Konnor?” I whisper, my eyes heavy with love. I love him so much. I search through the dim light for his dimpled smile, eager to see a glimpse of those green irises that make me feel like home. I squint to search the face on top of me, but it is so dark. Blank.

Propping himself up on his elbow, he feeds his free hand through my hair, combing his fingers from the roots to the ends. He rocks into me and groans, pressing his strained jeans into my thigh, his longing like steel against me. My whole body responds to his rhythm. I widen my knees and welcome him. His noises get more desperate as he picks up the pace, groaning, rubbing, harder, faster.

When the light flickers before returning the room to pitch blackness, I see his face.

*His eyes aren’t green.*

The pressure of his body pushes me harder into the mattress, restricting air, until I’m being sucked into the bed. My body descends and my fingers claw at the sheets that are now walls, trying to pull myself back up. Panic sets in. Heaving violently, my body gyrates within the hollow of sheets.

“Thank you.”

There is nothing tender about these words. My mouth opens, stretching so wide as if something were crawling out, and I’m silently screaming.

My eyes fly open.

Trying to catch my breath, to get some air, even just a little, I gasp for dear life.

"Get him away from me!" My voice breaks.

"Shhhhh," Elise croons, cocooning me in her arms. "It was just a dream."

Reality tumbles back.

*I am in my dorm.*

*It's been two weeks since Erik raped me.*

*I am safe.*

Elise pulls me tighter. "Shhhhhhh, Blesk." She kisses my temple. "Shhhh." We lie down on my bed and she smothers my head in her arms, brushing my hair with her little fingers. We both try to relax, fading in and out of awareness, but we never let go of each other.

That is the eleventh nightmare I've had since the day on the hill; the day in the basement. It never fails to leave me screaming. Is that how I really felt when Erik would crawl on top of me each night, pulling me from slumber as he would thrust into me? I can't remember. Every time I think about either of them, Konnor or Erik, all those horrific feelings flood me.

After the first dream, I told Elise everything, everything about that dream, and the truth about Erik and me. By sharing that secret, I felt all the shame I'd always hidden smash into me, slapping all my reasoning, and excuses, with reality. I tried to convince myself - and her - that what Erik did was a small price to pay for everything I put him through, and that it made him happier than it made me sad.

She told me it wasn't a small price to pay, it was the ultimate price to pay, and there should have never been a price to start with. Elise told me love doesn't have a price, it doesn't have compensation. It's free.

I never knew that.

What Erik did was so wrong. I realise that now. I no longer believe I deserved that. I'm not sure I could even look Erik in the eyes again. I feel deceived; I trusted him with everything. It wasn't until that dream that I remembered how it felt. To have my freedom taken away, again. To be used by the person who I trust the most after everything I've already endured. My biological father made me do things that any normal person would find incomprehensible. Erik knows my innocence was taken from me to support my father's lies, and then he does even worse and takes another piece. I was too caught up in Konnor, and all the emotions that came flooding back with his presence, to realise how very wrong what Erik did was. He used me, just like my father did. He touched me as if he owned me. He doesn't own me. *I*

own me. His hands were all over my skin, and he made me feel like it was his right. And I believed him. I seriously thought I owed him... for *loving* me.

This is the first time in my life I've been able to talk about my personal life with someone with a reasonable level of calm. We discuss my past and we use it to write songs for my live set at The Grill. I've always used my music as a form of expression, but thanks to Elise it is now also therapy. I often search the crowd for Konnor while I'm on stage, but he's never there. The messages have stopped, too. I'm terrified to analyse what that might mean. His absence is not unlike a hole in my existence, but I'm doing what is best for him; he doesn't need this kind of drama in his life. The kind of drama that is just... *me*.

Today we are engaged in one of our writing and counselling sessions while laying on our backs with our feet up on the wall.

"Perhaps, you don't want to get any closer to Konnor because you feel like his love might come with a price as well," Elise says.

"No, it's because he'll never love me, just her," I state adamantly.

"*Hmmm*, maybe, but I think it is more than that," she says, clicking her pen and pondering.

"Konnor is perfect with a perfect life. He has all these awesome friends, every girl wants to be with him... he's a star rugby player, and I'm just a burden. I'm damaged."

She laughs. "Pity party."

"Come on, Elise," I groan. "I actually mean it. I'm emotionally unavailable. It's going to take me so long to just be a normal girl. *Oh my god*, that is if I ever get there, I may never. He'll be unhappy with me."

"Okay, that may *all* be true. You are damaged, and strange. You say the strangest stuff, and make Yoda impersonations all the time, it's just odd." She laughs and then turns serious on a sigh. "But you know what, I reckon I'd rather be odd than normal. And I think you'll make Konnor very happy. You *are* his happiness. Being with you, that is what *makes* him happy... I think he's one of those guys who falls in love once and forever. You've had his heart since he was like five."

"He'll get over me. *He will*," I insist as I shuffle my bum back against the cold rendered brick wall.

"*Oh, okay*," she snorts, dubious. "Delusional you are. He dated Pemberton, a blonde-haired, brown-eyed girl, just to be closer to you. He's

been trying to fill your void since he was nine. Don't you get it, Wally? He's never getting over you!" She sighs, and we both linger in a moment of contemplation. "You're scared of letting someone in, I get it. Especially after what happened with Voldemort."

I lift my brow, questioningly. "Voldemort?"

"He Who Shall Not Be Named," she says in a very serious British accent.

She may be right. Konnor was starting to look at me with *that* look. His chest would quicken, and he'd touch me more, often even. His eyes were always on me. I liked how he made me feel, how good his closeness felt, and then something changed, and I was more averse to him touching me. I thought it was because he was Deakon, because he looked at me and saw Liz. But maybe it was because of Erik. My brain is a mushy mess of contradictory desires. I wanted him to want me, and now that he wants me, I'm scared. It isn't fair to him.

I blink at her and ask the same question that sits on my tongue every moment of every day. "How is he?"

"Do you want to have this conversation?" She tilts her head at me and blows my hair out of her face.

I giggle as her breath hits my cheek. "Yes."

She stares at me with the familiarity of an old friend. "Last time you got upset."

"I want to know." I turn to look at the ceiling and nod, hoping that motion will convince myself more than her. "Yep, I want to know."

"I saw him yesterday with Jaxon. He's . . ." she sighs, "not good, Blesk. He still texts me daily asking for updates, and he barely leaves his flat. He's drunk all the time. He's a mess, babe. I actually think he's getting worse." My breath hitches as I try to stop the guilt and shame from clawing at my insides. The thought of my actions causing him that much pain is too much to bear. I hate myself. More than I ever have, for once again being the inflictor of his pain.

Elise searches my expression. "Oh... I'm sorry. I know you probably didn't want to hear that."

"I need to talk to him, don't I?" I ask, swallowing an uncomfortable knot in my throat.

"Yes," she says. "At the *very least* listen to what he has to say. It's time to stop running, Blesk."

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## SIXTEEN: Konnor

I swirl the bourbon around in my glass, and scroll through my phone, rereading over 14 days' worth of messages to her.

**Konnor:** So, it's been 2 days since you broke my heart, Duch. At some point I'm going to need someone to save me. I have 5 cans of beans, 10 rolls of toilet paper, 5 bottles of bourbon, 2 bags of pasta, 6 tomatoes, 2 onions, 3 cloves of garlic, 5 frozen meals, 5 batteries, 1 spare light globe, 1 block of cheese, so at some point I will run out. Now I know you can't just let me starve, right?

**Konnor:** 4 cans of beans, 9 rolls of toilet paper, 4 bottles of bourbon, 1 bag of pasta, 4 tomatoes, 1 onion, 2 cloves of garlic, 5 frozen meals, 5 batteries, 1 spare light globe, 75% block of cheese.

**Konnor:** 3 cans of beans, 8 rolls of toilet paper, 3 bottles of bourbon, 1 bag of pasta, 4 tomatoes, 1 onion, 1 clove of garlic, 4 frozen meals, 5 batteries, 0 spare light globes, 50% block of cheese.

**Konnor:** 2 cans of beans, 8 rolls of toilet paper, 1 bottle of bourbon, 0 bags of pasta, 2 tomatoes, 0 onions, 1 clove of garlic, 4 frozen meals, 3 batteries, 20% block of cheese.

**Konnor:** 2 cans of beans, 7 rolls of toilet paper, 0 bottles of bourbon, 2 tomatoes, 1 clove of garlic, 2 frozen meals, 3 batteries, 10% block of cheese.

**Konnor:** 0 cans of beans, 6 rolls of toilet paper, 0 tomatoes, 1 cloves of garlic, 1 frozen meal, 3 batteries, 5% block of cheese.

**Konnor:** 6 rolls of toilet paper, 1 clove of garlic, 0 frozen meals, 3 batteries, 0% of a block of cheese.

**Konnor:** Getting hungry... 5 rolls of toilet paper, 0 cloves of garlic... tried garlic wrapped with toilet paper, I wouldn't recommend it, Duch. 3 batteries

I bombarded her message box for the first two days, begging, swearing, pleading, yelling, begging again. Grief chopped up my emotions like a

damn blender. No reply. I went insane. After day nine my phone had an unfortunate accident when it rammed itself into a hammer.

*Hammer 1: Phone 0*

It has been fourteen days. The worst fourteen *damn* days of my *damn* life, and in my case, that's quite the statement. It's been fourteen fucked up days since she snuck out of my room after the best day of my damn life, leaving a fucking note under my fucking arsehole of an alarm clock.

Fourteen days since I ate a real meal.

Fourteen days since I went to campus.

Fourteen fucked up days.

The most frustrating thing about this feeling that's churning in the pit of my stomach, feeding on my sanity, chewing on every cell inside me, is that it isn't *even fucking real*. No one hit me. No one beat me. I didn't get hit by a road-train. So why do I feel like I've been dragged behind a car for ten miles, and then buried, and am now slowly suffocating?

So, I started feeling desperate, as if I would do anything and say anything to get her to talk to me.

*Just fucking talk to me!*

*Goddamn it!*

I felt like without her voice and words, this fictitious pain would never stop. The crippling wound she left that morning was so concentrated, so deep, I just needed her voice like medicine. She wouldn't talk to me, won't. Thirteen years ago, I lost the most important person in my life, and I mourned her every day when I looked at Pemberton. I mourned her annually on the day she died. I mourned her every night when I closed my eyes and saw her sweet face. I mourn her still.

Our last night together replays in my mind, like it's a movie on damn repeat. We were holding hands, palms flat against each other for the first time. Dodging trees, snapping sticks with our feet in the silence. The moon glowed above, drilling beams of light through the terrain. Running, running scared. Her feet were so little, they couldn't carry her as fast as mine. I hear the noises of a small child running for her life—her cries and moans and grunts. She had no one to trust but the other small hopeless child holding her hand.

Lights flashed and dogs barked. Pulsing, running, faster, dodging, stumbling, until the lights and voices surrounded us. She looked at me through eyes glistening with sorrow. And then her face told me a silent

goodbye. That is how I know that look on her now, that goodbye. It is permanently imprinted on my mind. Every night of every day, when my eyes close, I see it.

I see that night. Our escape. So many years ago. Her hair lit up in the moon, and everything was in slow motion. The terror in her eyes caused me to place my good luck charm in her hand. The unicorn I was desperately clutching the day I was taken from my home four years prior. It was the last remnant of my past life. She smiled. Her eyes narrowed and then she pressed her lips to mine. I hadn't had human contact for over four years and besides her hand, the next thing I felt was her lips. Her soft, moist lips that tasted of salt from her tears.

Before I knew what had happened, she was running in a strange slow motion from me. Her hair swirled around her body as she bounced like a bunny through the trees towards one of the intruding lights. I let her hand go. I let her fingers leave mine. I was older. I should have never let her go. But her lips never left mine. I could still feel them. Then she ducked out behind a tree to escape the riotous barks and yelling, and the midnight blackness engulfed her. I was grabbed by a man who hushed me and told me I was safe. I believed him. He said they would find her and protect her. The next thing I knew, they were telling me she was dead.

Then to find her again and have her *choose* to leave. Words... words to describe that feeling. Pain. Shock. Despair. Shame. Aching. Broken. Shattered. Nothing. Fucked. It feels like someone is ripping any organ, any piece of flesh they can possibly clutch on to, straight from the easiest access point. Little pieces at a time.

Anger started soon after desperation, blinding no-holds-barred rage. How could she do this? How could she leave me again? So, I got angry, and I decided to hate her, her and every other motherfucking person around me. I treated Jax like shit, I treated Adolf like shit, and I missed my little sister Cassidy's eighteenth. Just to add to the charm bomb I've recently become, I then tried to wash her memory away, down the fucking drain.

I did some stupid shit... I tried to heal the holes. The holes from all the pieces of flesh that were ripped from me. I filled them with alcohol, and then... I filled them with girls. Too many to count, each one of them blonde. I attempted to no avail to fuck her memory away, hard, carnal, fucking. But it didn't work. Because for a few moments, for a few heavenly seconds

when I joined the waking world and saw that blonde hair fanned out around me, I forget, I forget she left. Then... I start mourning her all over again.

The door is sounding like a damn drum, over and over and over and over. "Go away!" I yell and bury my head into the pillow. "Fuck off!"

I keep my eyes shut and grumble, planning on ignoring my visitor in the hopes they tire and go away. I roll onto my back and my cock jerks up, running up my navel and demanding some early morning attention. I rub my face with both hands and mumble inelegant words to myself. The sound is so loud it's as if shots are being fired point-blank behind my eye sockets. Hiding from the drones of life seems better than answering the damn door and being forced to string together coherent thoughts.

I grip my boner and stroke, dragging my palm up and down. Imagining that knocking sound is my bed slamming against the wall as I fuck Blesk, hard. Imagining her soft, fleshy thighs are wrapped around my waist as I shove her up the mattress with each thrust, feeling her walls gripping me, begging me to stay deep inside her. Oh fuck, yes. My cock contracts, beads of precum sliding over my fingers. Hissing her name, my muscles start to quiver, and I'm panting, stroking faster, squeezing tighter, biceps twitching, groans rolling up my throat, abdomen clenching. *Fuck*, feels so good. So tight. *Blesk...*

"Blesk."

A moan shatters my illusion. "Oh, don't tell me you've forgotten my name, baby. It's Vanessa. Can you get the door?" Her pelvis slides up my thigh, rubbing herself along me. I release my cock and spin over to scrutinise the girl beside me. She looks nothing like Blesk. I drag my hand down to pull the sheets away, revealing a tall naked body that's way too skinny. Not a natural curve in sight. Knocks continue to break the silence.

Her eyes scroll over my face and down to my erection, and a little grin plays on her lips. "Baby, you wanna play again let's do it, but get the fucking door first." Her tone and gutter mouth just reinforce how unlike my Duchess she is. I jump up, pull on a pair of tracky-pants, and tuck my erection into the waistband before walking to unlatch the door.

My whole body relaxes when I see those blue eyes staring at me from the doorway, even though they're narrowed and fiery. I've put a lot of pressure on Elise lately. No matter how I behave, how much it may hurt her, or would potentially hurt Blesk, Elise comes by every day. She has literally put me to bed, she has been on the receiving end of my drunken temper, and

now she is, well... she's one of my best friends. And the fact she even gives me the time of day shows that I haven't lost Blesk—not completely. Elise's presence is like having a little piece of Blesk here with me. I crave her visits.

“What sleazy whore do you have in here this time? It smells like skank!” She walks in as if she owns the place, and I don't even bat an eye. She can do whatever she wants.

“How is she? Is she okay? Is she ready to talk to me?” I ask, sounding desperate as I wipe my drowsy eyes with my palms.

Elise searches the apartment, noticing the clothes on the floor, the messy sheets, and the girl, before she spins to scowl at me. “I haven't told her, ya know, about you and your blonde addiction, but you need to stop it, Konnor. Aren't we trying to get her back? Huh? Isn't that what we're trying to do?”

“I thought *I* was your best friend,” I joke, and then cover my mouth as I cough.

Revulsion distorts her face. “Have you been smoking again?”

Her scowl makes my knees buckle. “*Maybe.*”

“Yes,” I groan.

“Yes, what?” she asks forcefully.

“Yes, we are trying to get her back!” I snap.

Then a half-naked model walks towards us from my room and I am inundated with shame.

She scowls. “Did that nerdy little bitch just call me a whore?”

*Did she just call Elise a bitch?*

I spin to face Vanessa, heat penetrating my temples. “Watch your mouth around my friend!”

An insulted gasp breaks from her pouting lips. “What? She just called me a whore!”

Elise's eyes rake over Vanessa with disgust. Her lips twitch and her face scrunches up. I point to Elise while staring sternly at the girl I just woke up next to. A girl who is as familiar to me as a stranger.

“See that girl?” I wait until she nods, and then say, “She is *crazy* important to me, and you aren't. So, I'm confused why you're still here. *Oh*, and by the way, that was me telling you to leave.” I point to the door.

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It's Tuesday night, and I'm going to see Duch play, despite Elise's disapproval. The threat of separated limbs kind of disapproval. She told me not to make an appearance because she is still working on things with Blesk; she doesn't want to see her run from me again either. Elise says Blesk needs more time, but I can't go another moment without seeing her. Too many blondes have clouded my memory of her, and I need to just take a peek.

Avoiding The Grill on a Tuesday and Friday night has been like trying to avoid my own personal variety of meth. I knew she would be there, looking exceptional and singing our song. It isn't how extraordinary she looks that is the problem, it is how everyone else will look at her. The state I was in, am in, I would lose friends if I saw even a glimpse of it. I would lose my job. I have tried everything to get her to talk to me, I've tried to be cute. I sent stupid corny messages that made her absence from me a simile to an apocalypse. I hope she got it; I'm sure she did. I thought maybe she would laugh at how pathetic it was. I would have. But then she would have remembered how corny I am when it comes to her, and she'd be happy. I'd be making her smile from a distance.

*You are pathetic, Konnor. Useless. Pathetic. Arsehole.*

Walking into The Grill, I wander to the bar, and while leaning on the 90s Jacks bar-run, I signal Jewels. Jewels has been working the bar at The Grill for as long as I can remember. As she approaches, I slam a card down on the bar, a little harder than intended. My eyes flicker in response to the sound.

I look at Jewels apologetically. "Sorry, gorgeous, can I grab a Makers Mark and dry?" There is a very real possibility she will bat those long lashes at me and refuse me service. She tilts her head, and her eyes don't give me a flicker of 'swooning', *damn*.

"Slater, you're drunk, and I've known you too long to fall for that shit."

"Jewels, give me a drink. The girl playing tonight is my girl, and I can't see her without a drink in my hand. Be a friend?"

She rolls her eyes at me and smirks. "I have no idea what that even means, but okay. You can have three drinks, this is number one, and I'll make sure all the other bar staff know."

“Thank you,” I say, clapping my hands together in a prayer-like gesture. “Thank you! You’re a goddess. Has Brock told you lately how good you’re looking, Jewels?” I continue sucking up to her as she smirks in my direction while grabbing a tumbler and pouring my drink. “Well, if he hasn’t then... you are looking *good*, Jewels.” I lean on the bar and peer around looking throughout the crowd for friendly faces. No Jax. No Drake. No one I know. Then my eyes fall on Willow. She doesn’t see me, *thank god*.

“Slater!” I hear someone yell. I search the room for the bearer of the voice. As I’m searching for that person, I see Blesk walk out and start to set up.

*Farrkk...*

I knew I shouldn’t have come. I knew it was a bad idea to see her on stage. Damn Elise for knowing that, too. Is that the kind of shit she has been wearing this whole time? Maybe she is just my type, or maybe she is just perfect, in the purest, truest sense of the word. Like, you look up perfect in the dictionary, but you don’t get a picture because it isn’t a fucking picture book, but you do get a detailed description of Blesk. The only issue there is the most incredible aspects of her beauty, no picture and no words can express it. I wish she wasn’t wearing that dress. I can’t handle how obviously she displays vulnerability. Her legs are completely exposed and I know how good they look when they move. Loose and fleshy, curvy in the most spectacular way. She presses her thighs together and sits the guitar on her lap, tuning it with her long slender fingers. I’ve seen her, I’ve seen her, so now I should just leave. But I can’t.

*I won’t.*

She removes a black piece of pipe from her case, and attaches it to her guitar, then she swivels and adjusts it until a frame sits just in front of her mouth. She pulls something from her bag, and lays it on her lap, running her finger along its length before positioning it in the cradle and tightening the screws.

*My harmonica.*

Maybe that is what she has been doing this whole time.

*Thinking of me?*

And learning how to play that harmonica.

“Hi, my name is Blesk Bellamy, and this song is called ‘Without You’.” As her fingers begin to strum the melody, she takes a big breath in. She licks her lips and I can tell she’s nervous. A flutter fills my chest, making it

hard to breathe. She moves her mouth to the harmonica, and frowns with concentration as she blows<sup>1`</sup> through the channels is obvious, at least to me. I can feel her nerves pulsing through me as if they were my own. I glare and hush anyone around me who imposes the slightest disturbance. She begins to produce a new sound, with her lips on my harmonica and her fingers picking the strings. The harmonica's music fills the spaces that aren't filled with words. Christ only knows how she manages her breathing like that.

"It isn't till I didn't know,  
It isn't really truly alone,  
Until you aren't there,  
Until I made it unfair.

Fear forever tests time,  
Time is tested in the mind,  
Mind forever questions time,  
Time's worth nothing without you.

Greens don't say go,  
Greens stay gold forever,  
In between go and slow,  
In between like and love.

Fear forever tests time,  
Time is tested in the mind,  
Mind forever questions time,  
Time's worth nothing without you.

Touch isn't worth its dime,  
Touch can't be all of mine,  
Coins aren't worth the content,  
Coins won't spin like mine.

Fear forever tests time,  
Time is tested in the mind,  
Mind forever questions time,  
Time's worth nothing without you."



The last line of the chorus that has filled my chest with hope, which is all I wanted, *'time's worth nothing without you.'*

She plays a few covers before ending on my favourite; *Hero Boy*. She plays it, and every chord runs the entire length of my veins. I lose my shit, tearing up and falling in love all over again. I love her. I love her. I love Blesk. Listening and admiring that song with a fresh perspective, it seems so obvious now. Every line takes the listener through our story, from beginning to end. In the basement, *'It's still dark at three pm, dark for no good reason,'* making our promises, *'Let's do all the things we planned to do, remember what we wanted to,'* running away and changing our names, *'and we will run from the clawless fox, we can unchain and unlock that box, let's smash our names with blunt rocks, 'til they disappear and no one talks.'*

*It is all there.*

I lean on the bar and focus on simple innate tasks, like breathing, swallowing, standing.

*Breathe, Konnor.*

As I'm trying to hold myself together, struggling to contain all the emotions radiating from me, someone pats me on the shoulder. I turn to acknowledge whoever it is, despite knowing my eyes are red and swollen. "Hey, man," I say to Drake, wiping my eyes with my sleeve. He diverts his gaze to the ground.

"Fuck, Slate, sort ya self out, will ya?" He grips my shoulder and squeezes it to signify he only half means what he said. But his voice sounds genuine with worry, and that makes me feel worse because I hate pity.

"Yeah, I know, right? What a pussy," I say with a forced huff. I'd be mocking me mercilessly, if I were him.

"Nah, mate, pussies are useful, you're more like a... an appendix or something," he chuckles at his own joke. So do I. "How much have you had to drink today?"

"Not enough."

He glares at me, dubiously. "I think that's a subjective analysis, mate."

I hold my hand up to signal Jewels to pour me another drink. "I've already been limited. Jewels is looking after me."

Drake nods at the lovely Jewels in appreciation. "She does some things right."

“You’d know,” I say, preparing myself for an entertaining interaction between the two of them. They dated for a year, and it was a hot and heavy romance. The kind that ends in a train wreck.

Jewels approaches us. “Drake, you still haven’t done anything about that thing on your shoulders.”

He chuckles. “And you clearly still haven’t been to the gym.”

She rolls her eyes. “I don’t need a gym. Brock keeps me fit enough.”

“Funny, looks like you’re losing definition. Maybe you should take me back, and I’ll show you how mattress gymnastics should be performed.”

A flirtatious smile pulls at her lips. He mirrors her expression and leans on the bar, edging closer to her.

“I’ve been trying to get that disgusting five seconds out of my mind for the past six months, and I wouldn’t want to undo all that effort,” she says, then she walks off with a slight skip in her step.

Drake grins from ear-to-ear and calls out, “It took you six months?”

She scoffs and spins to face him. “That kind of trauma takes a while to get over.”

As he watches her lean across the bar and serve another person, he says, “She wants me.”

I crack up. “You got burn, man,” I chuckle, looking around to see the band area empty.

Blesk has completely packed up. She didn’t look out into the crowd once, so she never saw me. She’s gone. Her absence immediately forces the air out from the room, and I begin to panic.

“Does she usually have a drink after her sets?” I ask Drake.

Drake looks at his feet evasively.

“What?” I ask, frowning at him suspiciously.

He takes a weird exaggerated breath in and releases it quickly, pushing the words out at the same time. “She usually has a drink afterwards, dude. Usually someone buys her one or she sits with some people she seems to know.”

“Why are you looking so nervous? What aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing. It’s just,” he starts, talking calmly as if not to startle an animal, “I saw her getting a bit cosy with this guy last Friday.”

*What the hell does that even mean?*

I feel like I’m at a boiling point. Drake notices my expression and continues, “Calm down. I intercepted her, mate. She looked startled to see

me, and then I hung out with her the rest of the night.”

“*Intercepted?* Intercepted what, exactly? Seriously Drake, you being all vague is making this worse. Did he kiss her? Touch her? What happened?”

“His arm was draped around her shoulder. And they were close. Like, if I were her boyfriend, it would have been *too* close. I couldn’t see much more. When I approached, it was like a bomb went off. They turned into shrapnel.”

*Calming breaths.*

“Point Casanova out to me? Is he here?” I gesture towards the booths. Every muscle in me is distractingly tight and rigid, and the alcohol is stopping rational thought from settling in my mind.

“What are you gonna do?” Drake asks hesitantly.

“*Nothing,*” I say, feigning innocence. “Have a chat. A *nice* chat.”

He points, and recognition narrows my eyes.

*It's Matt from my Beginners Education to Music 103 class.*

*Little shit.*

I didn’t like him from the moment I saw him. Though he’s alone, there are two drinks on his table. I’m going to make damn sure one of them is for me. I wander over, ignoring whatever it is Drake is trying to say to me.

I grab the drink and slide down in front of Matt. “Thanks for the drink.”

*Yep, I'm going to lose my job.*

Shock transforms his face as I swig on Blesk’s drink. “K . . . Konnor,” he stutters. “Well, that wasn’t for you, but I can grab another one.”

I eyeball him warningly. “She likes wine. White.”

“What?” he avoids my eyes, pretending he has no idea what I’m talking about when he obviously does. I part my legs, slouch down and make myself comfortable in the chair opposite him.

I snort. “Blesk. She likes wine. Not whatever cheap rum is in this.”

“It’s Captain Morgan, actually, and I really like it.” I’m completely startled when I hear her voice come from behind me.

I fly up and spin around as she approaches, a little smile faintly visible. Gravity, time, space, any quantifiable relevance to moments and places completely cease to exist. Time is still, everyone and everything else stops, the music stops, and the drumming of my pulse fills my ears.

*She is so beautiful.*

*And I'm pretty wasted.*

My heart lodges in my throat when she is only a few steps away. She stops and lifts a blonde brow at me, grinning. She sees straight through me.

"Hi, Mr. Slater. You aren't dead. I thought you ran out of food."

"I ate the batteries," I murmur as a grin tugs at my lips.

She laughs, and we both beam at each other.

"I'm glad you aren't dead."

"Wouldn't you rather have wine, though?" I ask, cheekily. "Over rum, I mean. Wine is so delicious and corny and good looking."

She giggles, and that gorgeous tongue sticks out. "Wine *is* corny and good looking." She rolls her eyes before continuing. "And delicious. But rum is *easy*." Her sly little smile makes my eye lids heavy.

I take her hand. "Oh, now nothing good ever comes easy."

Our eyes lock on each other.

I completely don't care that we are in public, on display, or that everyone is looking, because she is the only thing I care about. I don't care that Matt looks like I just stole his favourite toy, glaring up at us from behind his glass of beer. I don't care about anything other than her. And right now, she is the only person I want to see. Her face. And I don't want her to go another second thinking I don't love her with every inch of my being, and then some.

"Duch." I place my hand over the top of hers, pancaking it between both of mine. I anchor myself in those fluttering brown eyes. "I know you think I don't love you, *for you*—"

She interjects with a pleading little voice, "Konnor, stop, I know—"

Pathetic desperation causes me to cut in. "No, I need to talk to you, I just—"

"Konnor, *I know*," she says. "It's okay. I was going to come see you soon. I wanted to see you. I wanted to talk."

*Oh, thank fuck!*

"Duch, do you," I clear my throat, "Do you wanna go for a long pointless walk with me?"

She smiles. "Yes."

I am so consumed by being with her again I don't even remember leaving The Grill but we are now strolling silently, hand-in-hand. We walk as we walked weeks ago when we thought we were strangers strangely drawn together.

I stop and turn to face her. She mimics my position, giving me her undivided attention.

“Will you let me speak? I may ramble, I just have to say some things that have been on my mind for the past few weeks.”

Her eyes smile at me. “The floor is yours, Mr Slater.”

I inhale a big deep breath for courage. “I know you think that I don’t love you for you, Duch! For the woman you have become. But you are so wrong. My love for you is goddamn pathological. I do love Liz, I do. I grew into half a man without her, thinking about her, and I have loved her more than my own life.

But I love the person she has become, too, just as much, just as intensely. You have become an incredible woman. You’re so talented. So funny. I love that you mock me and laugh at me when I get jealous. I love that you look at me like I look at you. I love the way you press your tongue between your teeth when you smile. I love how your giggle comes from your throat, and when you laugh your shoulders shake, like you can’t stop even if you wanted to. I love the way you say *o...kay* in a cute voice when I have convinced you to do something that makes you nervous . . .”

Her lips are trembling, and shiny tears run down her face as she begins to cry. Her chest rises and falls more rapidly, as does mine. And then she giggles through a silly splutter of tears.

That giggle, those tears of happiness, *I did that*.

I continue. “I love that you’re happy with a hot dog over a five-star meal. I love that you’re terrible at puns. I love that you are sentimental and that when you see something unique or beautiful you fixate on it and let it take complete control of the moment for you. I love that you check me out and don’t try to hide it.”

She gasps when I pull her into me until her chest is rested right where it ought to be—against mine.

“I love you, Duch. It’s insane, but I *fucking* love you.” I wipe a tear from her cheek and watch as she processes my words. “Don’t cry.”

“I just didn’t want to be loved for her.”

“You aren’t. Give me a chance to show you.”

She sighs into a smile. “*Okay... you had me at cello.*”

*Damn that sounds good to hear...*

Those six words smother the fire that’s burned inside me for the past two weeks and soothe me like nothing else could.

Her grin grows. “Are you going to kiss me already?”

“Woah, slow down girl.” I laugh. “I mean, you’re pretty, but, seriously, at least take me out for dinner first.”

She glares at me, but her grin conveys her true feelings. I can’t help myself. I need to claim those lips. I caress the nape of her neck while I guide her towards my mouth, then brush my lips gently along hers, savouring the moment. We both exhale on contact, relieved, releasing all that need. I part my mouth, running my tongue slowly along her lower lip and tasting the saltiness of her tears. When her lip twitches against my tongue, restraint becomes impossible. I need her. I need her now.

Her whole body goes slack when my arms tighten around her waist, pulling her onto her tippy toes and crushing our lips together. My mouth kneads around hers, moulding our lips together. Blesk moans, and every part of me reacts.

I massage her tongue with mine, wanting to suck it, taste it. I kiss her with so much passion, as if without her lips I may die. She tastes as good as I thought. Nothing has ever felt this right, this good. Nothing ever will. Her lips were meant to be on mine.

My hands enjoy the feel of the delicate curve from her waist to her arse. I deepen our kiss, tilting my head and showing her the depth of my yearning. I trace the arc of her spine and feel her muscles spasm in response to my fingertips, quivering under my touch. My breath is lost somewhere in her mouth. She is stealing my air, my sanity, and any hope I had of surviving an existence without her. I’m in crazy, irrevocable, undeniable love.

## SEVENTEEN: Deakon

“What do you mean?” the boy asks the man who hovers over his bed smiling at him with tight lips and narrowed eyes. He looks at the boy with pity and concern, and the boy doesn’t want any of it.

“What do you mean?” the boy repeats, involuntarily caressing the soft sheets below him and blinking at the surrounding lights. It is too bright for him. The man pats the boy’s shoulder, a long, firm pat that feels like it could leave a bruise. The boy can’t remember the last time someone touched him there. Maybe no one ever has. The boy forces his eyes to bear the bright lights so he can look up at the older man. “Say it again.”

The boy doesn’t understand the words the man has been repeating to him. Or perhaps he refuses to because that would mean believing them, and that would mean they are true, and that would be completely unbearable. Unbearable for a boy who has endured four years of imprisonment. A new level of unbearable.

“I’m sorry. She’s gone.”

*They said they would find her and keep her safe,* the boy thinks to himself. *Protect her.* They used the word *protect*.

*We will find her.*

The boy repeats the words he heard in the woods and prefers them much more to the ones he is hearing now.

*We will find her*

“Liz fell. We did everything we could,” the man says.

*We did everything we could.*

*We did everything we could.*

*What does that mean?*

*What did they do?*

*What did they need to do?*

*Why don’t people ask me?*

*I could have told them.*

*She gets scared in the dark.  
She falls on steps sometimes.  
She is allergic to bee stings.  
She is very bad at math.  
She thinks there is a girl in her class who doesn't like her.  
Have they asked that girl?  
Why didn't they ask me?  
I could have told them.  
What did they need to do?*

The boy feels sickness rack his body. Heat rises up his throat. He forces himself to remain calm and frowns up at the man for more answers.

*"How many days has it been?"*

The man breathes out loudly. "One days, Deakon."

The boy is too sad to talk now.

*Liz.*

"She's gone, Deakon. She has gone somewhere better."

*Somewhere better?*

*Then she would be with me.*

*Or she would take me.*

*Why wouldn't she want to be with me?*

*I only want to be with her.*

*Somewhere better?*

*I don't understand.*

The boy suddenly smiles. "She doesn't know where I am," he says, realisation brightening his eyes. "Tell her, and then she'll come back."

The man shakes his head slowly. "No, Deakon, she won't be back because she's gone to heaven."

*She wouldn't go anywhere without me.*

*"Where is heaven?"*

The man slouches on a deep sigh. He blinks at the boy for a moment, and then turns to talk to someone behind him. The boy doesn't like the man. Or the other one.

"Where is heaven?" the boy yells, more panicked than he can remember ever being. "I need to know how to get there."



## EIGHTEEN: Blesk

I did choose wine; I chose Konnor. Of course, as if there was really any question. I knew that I wanted to talk to him. I thought maybe we could start a fresh relationship, an honest one. Then before I got the chance he had to go and say all that wonderful stuff about me, and detail all the reasons he loves me. I am a fool. I couldn't resist him.

After a few drinks, we walked back to his apartment in comfortable silence. My cheeks have been on fire since our kiss. I've never had a kiss consume my whole body, smother my mind in relentless need, and coil its warmth around my soul like an entity apart. He held me against him with a gentle dominance and led without hesitation, with a natural rhythm and yearning. His lips, the perfect mixture of soft and firm. His big strong hands moved around my body possessively, obsessively. Every kiss should be measured by that one. But most of all, I felt safe. I felt safe in his arms and pressed to his lips. Somewhat of a new feeling for me.

As we walk into his apartment, an unwelcome shudder niggles at my belly. Konnor's expectations for the next step could definitely conflict with mine. I want to be with him. I always have. But now . . . I feel ready. I'm ready to tell him everything he deserves to know and suffer the consequences. The rest is up to him because I don't have the willpower to stay away from him any longer. If once he's privy to everything and he still wants me, then I'm the luckiest girl in the world and won't ever walk away from him again.

But I know I'm not ready to have sex with him, not after Erik, not after realising how much that should mean. But if I don't then I may lose him, and the thought of that sits heavy in my heart. I know he's a very sexual person; girls throw themselves at him and people talk openly about his promiscuity. But I just can't take that step with him until I'm sure it's for the right reasons. I don't want any doubt. I don't want it to feel like

payment for his love. I hope he can wait for me, and I hope he doesn't think I don't want him. I do.

But first, I need to tell him the truth, every dirty aspect of it. About my father, about me, and about what I did to him so many years ago that changed his life forever. Then we can release the secrets and horrors of that life to the wind, and be us, as we are now.

I glance around his apartment. It's bare. This only furthers my sudden unease.

"Where is your alarm clock?" I ask, staring around his nearly empty apartment.

"That alarm clock was a jackarse, so I broke it. Presenting me with your letter was the last straw." I tilt my head at him and smile. He shrugs. "It had plenty of warnings."

"It's an inanimate object, Konnor," I say, with a chuckle.

"Oh, trust me, that didn't stop it from bossing me around every damn day. I did us both a favour. It didn't have very nice things to say about you, either."

"And everything else?" I spin around and tilt my head at him, gesturing towards the bare room.

He takes a deep breath and lowers his chin, a flush of shame spread across his cheeks. "Broke a few other things too, Duch. *Buuuuuut*, I have a present for you." He wanders over to the cupboard and swings open the door, then he squats slightly and reaches inside. Turning to grin at me mischievously, he pulls out a huge piece of canvas. Every part of me brightens, because I know exactly what it is.

*The painting.*

I jig in place like a little kid, waiting for its unveiling. Watching my expression intently, he brings it over and sits it on the kitchen bench. He pulls back the paper sheet and studies me while my eyes take it all in, rolling over every colour and shape. As I study it, my breath catches in my throat and I press my fingers to my smile.

*It's beautiful.*

The figures are vaguely prominent, but they are still visible to anyone really looking. Each human stencil is distinguishable within a different colour: Drake is mostly purple, Elise is orange, Jaxon is primarily red, and Konnor and I are in the centre, barely coloured at all, just defined by outlines of red and pink. Like a heart. Our white silhouettes explode with

these two colours, whereas the rest of the canvas is coated wholly. My heart aches because it is so ludicrously unambiguous that we are in love with each other right there, in that moment.

*In our life, in time... and in space.*

I'm unable to take my eyes off it, unable to comprehend how we could look so in love. In love *before* we knew we were Deakon and Liz, when we were *just* Konnor and Blesk. We barely knew each other. Nevertheless, it is ridiculously clear we're crazy about each other even then.

I swallow pass the guilt I have about what I just put him through.

"I... I love it."

Placing the painting flat on the kitchen bench, he grabs his phone and activates the stereo with it. Joshua Radin's voice sounds through the speakers with humble acoustic beauty. A song I know begins to play: "Someone Else's Life."

"I'm glad," he whispers. "I love it, too."

I am feeling so much. Too much. He reaches for my elbow and stops me from ducking away. He envelops me in his arms, knowing exactly what I truly need—what I don't even know I need. I let out a small sigh when I feel his body against mine. His heart's beat is running rampant, like mine. He lowers his head, nestling it sweetly beside my cheek.

"I love you, Blesk," he says into my ear. His words hit me like an electric shock. This time, I know he really does. "I can't write or play the guitar, Duch, but this song reminds me of us." He feeds his fingers through mine and begins to dance with me, lowering his hand to the small of my back and dances with me.

*"Sing while I dance, Kon. Sing, and whistle."*

*"I wish I could dance with you Liz, like a walzz."*

*"It is called a waltz. With a T."*

*"Yeah, a waltz. But I would be in charge because I'm the boy."*

*"Na-ah! I'd be in charge! Watch me, watch me twirl. See . . . Spin in your cage, spin like this. It's fun."*

*"You're a terrible dancer, Liz."*

*"You're a terrible singer, Kon."*

He hums the tune with a silly grin on his face and sings a few of the lyrics to me, "Showing you all the ways I've grown . . ."

Konnor chuckles at me as I sniffle and try to hide my glistening eyes, ashamed I'm tearing up again. I'm just so darn sick of crying all the time; however, if I had to choose between either never crying again or crying both these tears and the ones brought on by adversity, I would choose to cry so I could have moments like this. He steals kisses whenever he can, wrestling with my attempts to hide my flushed face.

The wine has warmed my cheeks, and his unwavering attention warms every other part of me. He cradles me close to him, rocking me, swaying and dancing -- he moves with confidence. I giggle as he steals more kisses from me, from my neck, my jaw, and my shoulders. "You're a terrible dancer," he whispers with a chortle.

My tongue pushes through the middle of my teeth as I smile up at him. "You're a terrible singer."

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It is after midnight now and we are both a little drunk, lying on his bare mattress, facing each other as we've done before. We're sharing a pillow, and his emerald irises are only inches away, every freckle within them visible. He gazes at me, eyes bouncing around my face, almost as if he's mapping my features to a grid in his mind.

"I've spent a million nights thinking about touching you," he sighs, "thinking about touching more than your finger." He places his index finger tenderly on my shoulder and I shiver beneath it, the warmth from that one body part radiating to my core. He traces slowly from my collarbone, down, down to the crease in my elbow, along my forearm, and into the centre of my palm. His breathing deepens as he circles the patterns of my hand's inner centre, focusing on every etched line. His eyes are heavy, gazing at me with that look; the one that carries so much emotional responsibility.

*That look of love.*

"I know this sounds weird but I always dreamed of being able to touch you, even just with my finger. For four years I laid on that mattress in the dark and ran my index finger over my thumb—over and over—dreaming my thumb was you. I would imagine being able to feel your cheeks and your lips." As he speaks, uncertainty crosses his face.

“I remember seeing your bruises, Duchess.” I stiffen and inhale sharply. I had many bruises, and often.

“I wanted to touch them and soothe them, on your wrist, and your knees, and your chin... I thought that if I could touch them, and kiss them, I could make them feel better. The stupid things kids think, hey?” he laughs. “Is that weird?”

I frown at him. “I would never think that was weird,” I murmur, trying to settle the nervous twitch that always inundates me when my past life is discussed.

“I’m going to touch you now,” he states, his voice husky and intense.

I try to settle in, nestling into the pillow. “Okay.”

He lifts his finger to my neck, stroking my quickly accelerating pulse down the column of my throat. My lips are uncomfortably dry, and every cell inside me can feel the heat from his fingertip trailing a line across my skin with its intensity. His finger traces the outline of my chest, down until it rests just above my nipple.

*Oh, hell.*

This is more intimate than anything else I’ve ever experienced. My heart goes into overdrive and starts beating against my ribcage.

*Breathe, Blesk.*

He searches my expression, narrowing his heavy-lidded eyes further. “Can I keep going?” I give him a nervous nod. His finger rolls over my nipple, and both of us suck in a quick rush of air, our breath stopping. But he doesn’t hover there, instead he continues to stroke my torso down to my navel. His finger circles my skin and shivers rush up my spine. He slides down further and all of a sudden I flinch, causing his finger to retract from me.

“I’m so sorry,” my voice shakes, “I’m just not ready for . . . *that*.” Disappointment weighs my insides down like a lead boulder; that moment meant so much to him. He’d dreamt about it for years.

I engulf my face in my palms hoping that somehow, I will miraculously slip away into oblivion never having to explain my previous sentence. I can’t see his face from within my hands, but I’m positive he’s frowning at me. His fingers feed through mine, pulling them away and revealing what I’m sure is a sheepish expression.

“What is this? Why are you hiding your face?” he asks. The pain in his voice cuts sharp to my core. “Have I tried to do something you didn’t want

me to do, or made you feel uncomfortable, Duch?" His brows are knit together in confusion and his eyes display a muddle of emotions. He hasn't done anything wrong or presumptuous, and doesn't deserve this ambiguity, but I don't want to discuss Erik. If history is anything to go by, then as soon as I trust a boy, conditions are invisibly attached.

He brushes the hair from my face, soothingly. "I don't want anything from you. Ever. If you don't want to do it," he lowers his head and shakes it back and forth, "then neither do I. *Fuck*, I should've known better. After everything you've been through."

Something floods his face, and he rolls off the bed, wandering over to the bathroom and walking inside. I hear a *thud*. My breathing picks up pace as I climb to my feet and follow him. He's gripping the basin and staring at himself in the mirror, his face filled with loathing.

He turns to look at me, his irises dilated to the point of near blackness. "I *hate* what he did to you. It kills me."

My stomach knots up. "I just need time."

His jaw tightens. "Did I make you feel uncomfortable?" He moves to my side, pulling me back to the bed and squatting in front of me. He places one shaky hand on my knee and the other on my shoulder while he peers up at me with those lovely green eyes. "I'm sorry, beautiful, I am so, so sorry. I never want to make you feel uncomfortable."

*He hasn't done anything.*

I grab his hand and look at it; the cuts on it have split open and are oozing blood again. He's still bruised and deformed from 2 weeks ago. He pulls it from me and out of sight. "Duch, say something."

I release a long breath, and despite my attempts to stop them, tears filter out of my eyes. "I'm sorry, Kon—"

"No," he cuts in, shaking his head. "Don't ever apologise to me. My feelings for you are making me go damn right out of my mind. But I'll slow down. I'll do better."

I touch my finger to his mouth and hush him. He forces a crooked grin, but his eyes betray that sentiment, and then he kisses my finger, again and again, until I move it away.

"You're so quick to blame yourself," I say. "This is my issue, I'm the one stuffing up, Konnor."

"No, Duch," he cups my cheek, peering up at me, "you have been through so much. It's my job to look after you now. Whatever that means,

whatever I need to do, I'll learn, I'll do better."

*God, he is so perfect.*

*Tell him the truth, tell him now!*

"Konnor." I shake my head to release his hand from my cheeks. "I have something to tell you."

His expression stiffens. "Okay." His voice borders on panic. "I'm not liking that look in your eyes, so just say it."

He parts my thighs, and moves to fill the gap between them, resting his arms on my legs, gripping my waist and peering up at my sheepish expression. "Say it. Just get it out."

A strained sigh escapes my lips. Summoning all my courage and accepting he will probably never want to speak to me again I dive in.

"The reason I struggle with Liz . . ." I begin, looking everywhere except his face. My palms start to sweat, so I rub them on my dress. "With being her, is because my father wasn't the one who kept you locked up. He wasn't the one who had the key. He wasn't the one who . . ." The words get caught in my throat and I need to choke them out. "I had the key. I could have let you out. The reason you can't remember much wasn't because you were sick. You were never sick. I was drugging you."

My heart jumps into my throat and I wait. Silence.

Then the strangest thing happens. A grin tugs at his cheek. I blink in astonishment, and blink again, and again. He is smiling up at me, with what looks like relief.

"Why are you smiling like that? I'm a monster," I say, radiating more confounding emotions than I ever thought possible. He chuckles, shaking his head slowly. My shoulders slump and I narrow my gaze at him, scrutinising his nonchalant attitude. "Did you hear what I said?" I almost a growl.

"I already knew that, Duch."

My mouth goes slack. "You what?"

"Of course I knew," he states, and rubs my thighs with his hands affectionately. "Well, about the key. But you didn't have a choice. You were a little kid doing what you were told. You were just as innocent as me, Blesk. You didn't know any better."

I've been dreading this conversation, and yet, he already knew. My brain is flipping, shuffling, trying to organise this new information into my mind, and still have a reason for years of self-destructive behaviour. Or a reason

for all the self-hate, guilt, and anger that festered in me and coaxed me into taking my own life.

I gape at him. “Why did you keep taking the pills then? Every day when I gave them to you? Why didn’t you refuse?”

“Because *you* gave them to me, and I didn’t want your father to hit you anymore.”

“When you told Elise everything you said you were sick, though” I question, my voice breaking with confusion.

“Yeah, because I didn’t want her to know. I don’t want anyone to have a single negative thing to say about you,” he admits.

My head feels dizzy. “Oh God, Konnor, that has been tormenting me my whole life. I killed her memory, I buried her, because I blamed myself for doing that to you.”

He reaches for my face again, stroking my cheek with the pad of his thumb, his soft emerald eyes boring into me. “Well, now you can let it go, Duch. If I knew that was all this was about . . . Christ, I’m so relieved.”

*All this was about?*

Heat radiates in my ears.

“No, Konnor, this is a huge deal!” I stand, pulling away from him and hugging myself tightly. “Huge! I tried to kill myse—” I halt halfway through the word and immediately regret it when his smile drops, and his eyes widen. He winces as if my words caused him physical pain, and devastation is all I can see in his eyes. My hand flies to cover my eyes, gripping the tension in my forehead, and protecting my heart from the vision of that look.

I lower my hand and search his expression. Creases are etching the space between his brows and he looks completely gutted.

“No.” He swallows hard. “Blesk, tell me that’s not true.”

My eyes drop to the floor.

“I was so young, and not having you *hurt* all the time. And what I did to you . . .” I suck in a shaky breath, “The police told me that I couldn’t live with that over my head, that people might blame me, that everyone would know I was the daughter of the man who stole the famous Deakon Nerrock. That it wasn’t safe for me, because of who you were. Your picture, your story was all over the news. For four years,” I whimper, my voice trembling, “I believed them. I believed that people would blame me because I blamed myself.” I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand in an attempt to



remove all the hot sticky tears flowing uncontrollably from them, but they're quickly replaced with more.

"And people *did* blame me, Konnor, they *did*. So how could I not blame myself? The night I helped you escape and we split up, my father found me first." My words come out between gasps. "I tried to scream, but he beat me unconscious. The cops surrounded our house and arrested him. They found me locked in my father's wardrobe. It was terrifying. I didn't trust adults. I spent that night in the same hospital you were in."

"They told me you died," he murmurs.

"I did. Someone knew I was there, someone blamed me for what happened to you. My first night in that hospital a man came into my room and held a pillow over my head. I tried to fight him off, but I was only eight. I passed out and," bile fills my throat, "I was legally dead for two minutes. They revived me but the police said it would be safer for me to stay dead—so to speak—so they gave me a completely new identity and reported my death." A wave of nausea floods me, and I begin to heave, gasping for air, dropping to my knees and putting my palms on the floor. My chest wheezes, aching with each rush of strained air. I focus on inhaling and exhaling small measured breaths, so I don't vomit.

Konnor follows me down and embraces me tightly. "Breathe, Duch."

When the memory of that night, the feeling of that pillow over my head, the feeling of his hand pressed firmly on the other side of it, fills me with terror, I cry out, "Someone wanted me *dead* for what I did to you, Konnor! I was only eight! I was only eight!" My body quakes violently within Konnor's strong arms.

"Stop talking, please, calm down," he begs. His voice bursts with emotion as he talks into my hair. The sorrow and pain surrounding us is dangerously palpable; a presence all their own, as if they were a living, breathing things.

"NO! I need to get this all out now," I continue speaking through sharp breaths. Choking and coughing out the words because I need them out, all of them. I want them out of my mind, and I want them out of my life.

"The next year was like a nightmare. I was hollow. I was still her, but I wasn't. I was no one. I sliced my thigh open in the tub."

"Christ, I don't wanna hear this, Blesk. Stop" he cries, tightening every muscle that is holding us both together. "This hurts. It hurts so bad to hear you talk like this."

I just keep talking as if the words are vomit, and with each heave I need them expelled. “I wanted to die. I was a terrible daughter who didn’t know how to love my mum or dad.” I gasp for air before continuing on. “I put them through hell, I put *you* through hell. Erik found me bleeding out in the bathtub.” I was dying all over again, and I wanted to this time. I just wanted the hurt to end, the guilt—”

“Please stop talking, please, I can’t take it. Everything you’ve been through is breaking my *fucking* heart. I need a second. Please, just focus on breathing.” He holds me to him, his hand wrapped around the back of my head, and his fingers entwined in my hair. As he rocks us back and forth, he mutters over and over again, “Just focus on breathing. Just focus on breathing. Just focus on breathing.”

I sniffle and press my cheek into his chest. “I hated myself. I hated myself, and I’m sorry. I am so, so *sorry*, Deakon. For being so weak. For giving up when you are so strong. I could—”

“SHIT! Liz, fucking stop talking, I can’t hear any more!” he shouts. He tightens his arms around me further and comes completely undone, sobbing into our embrace. Pain cuts through my core as his sounds become so fitful that I fear I may hear them every time I close my eyes. He broke. I broke him.

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I cringe at the dawn, my head throbbing, and my eyes dry from dehydration. We cried ourselves to sleep. If you cry long enough, sleep is your body’s innate way to regulate; I have always taken comfort in that fact. The pain will stop eventually, my body will shut down, and slumber will suck me into peaceful incoherence. As I slowly wake and spread my fingers across the sheets, Konnor’s side of the bed is cold. My chest tightens. I knew he would leave; I knew it would be too much for him to bear. Flapping at me from the bedside table is a letter.

*Duchess,*

*I woke up, and you were still asleep. I watched you sleep for a while, feeling like everything has gotten so fucked up. But, don’t worry, beautiful, I haven’t left. I’ve just gone for a walk to clear my head. That was horrific.*

*But... it was good as well, Duch. It was good because we have no secrets now. We are finally in this together again.*

*To think you were in the same hospital as me when they told me you had died. I should have looked for you. I should have known you were alive. I should have felt it.*

*Whoever that man was who tried to kill you in the hospital, he was sick. You are not to blame for anything. I never for one second thought that. And I will make damn sure no one else ever will.*

*I will never understand why you did what you did, I will never be able to get those words out of my head, I will never be able to get that picture out my head, because I would have died, everything inside me would have died with you that day.*

*We need to finish this, we need to finish their story, and try to gain some kind of closure. I know you want that. That is why you said goodbye to Liz. It was like a ritual... so you could move on. But it didn't give me closure. And us? It didn't finish our story. We have so many questions still unanswered... Why did your dad take me? Who tried to kill you that night in the hospital?*

*Now I know you aren't going to like this idea, which is why I'm writing it down. You can have some time to process it and then we can discuss it together, as a team, when I get back .*

*I think we should go visit your father in prison. I know you won't want to. God, do I know. But we need to. We need answers, and he has them. He probably has all of them. Then, if you want, we can bury Deakon, too. If that is what it takes to make sure you never feel that lost, that guilty, and that hopeless again, I will do that for you.*

*But I won't sit by and let you drown again, Duch, because I will be in that goddamn water with you. I will be there until I am so fucking weak from holding you up, that I will go down, too. So I need to be proactive, we need to, and instead of me trying to take care of you all the time, let's spend the rest of our lives taking care of each other.*

*I love you, Duchess.*

*Xo Konnor*

*As I read, I clutch my heart. Although I don't want Liz to be a part of our lives, he does, and that means I have to come to terms with what*

happened. Konnor is right. Liz and Deakon have so much of their story left to finish before we can truly find closure.

My father doesn't know I'm alive, and if he was the one who organised trying to have me killed, I may be putting myself at risk. Yet, he doesn't have my name, address, or any personal details and we will keep it that way.

It is time for me to be brave for Konnor. This is his story, too. No more running. I'm so proud of the man he has become, a man so beautiful and so compassionate. My father has answers that Konnor deserve, and my running has been inadvertently been keeping them from him. I will not be the reason he doesn't get them. With him by my side, I'm ready to step backwards in order to move forward.

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## NINETEEN: Konnor

When we arrive at Blesk's dorm, Elise is instinctively probing for answers as we pack an overnight bag. She is insisting we take her along, and after how drained I am emotionally from last night, I actually don't think it's a bad idea. Plus, I can't deny that little chick anything. And neither can Blesk. Far be it for me to know that apparently, Jax is an unexpected addition to the Elise package these days.

Gardier Prison is an hour outside my hometown, Brussman, so it'll take us just over three hours to get there. I requested to drive, and despite that meaning I had to abstain from my normal alcohol consumption, it seemed necessary, because I really needed to think. I needed some peace and quiet to shuffle through last night. It's hard to shake the thought of what Blesk did to herself. I keep picturing her in that tub. It's damn near incapacitating. It's hard to understand, because her body, her soul, every little thing that makes up a part of who she is, is so, so precious to me.

She feels weak because people treat her that way; they undervalue her. She is vulnerable, she is shy, but she is also sassy and, in the right company, a beautiful, alluring force. Erik always treated her like a dependent. That was probably his way of solidifying a permanent place in her life. She isn't a child, she's a Duchess, and I need to remember that.

When I look in her eyes, I still see Liz, that little girl. But she's right, she isn't that little girl anymore. She is a woman—an incredible woman, and sometimes my desperate need to protect her clouds that fact. I want to help her flourish, to gain strength within herself, and to love herself as much as I love her—because, she is just so *unbelievably* lovable. All I want to do is protect her, it is all I've ever wanted to do, and I will. I will always be there to catch her should she fall, always and forever. But I need to support her and not shelter her... I just can't believe she did it... it hurts so much more than anything I've ever endured. I'm never letting her go, and

I'm never giving up on her, and I will make damn sure she never gives up on herself again.

"Everyone is always going on about Shakespeare! I get it, the dude was good, but seriously, in high school, all I ever heard about was *bloody* Shakespeare," Jax whines, slamming his boots up onto the dashboard.

"Shakespeare coined more words than anyone else. He literally wrote 10 percent of our vocabulary," Elise says.

"Yeah, it was easier back then," I reply. "Hardly anyone could afford education and the educated had a lot to be desired. We have more competition than Shakespeare ever did."

Jax scoffs. "He didn't write my dictionary!"

"What, the *Moron Dictionary*?" Elise cracks up.

"The Australia Dictionary, *Elise*," Jax states, very matter-of-factly. "Where we add an *O* to the end of certain words, get it, kiddo?" Jax laughs and knocks me with his elbow.

"Give us a *demo*?" I smirk.

"Haven't you already heard most of them, *Kono*?" Jax says, feeding chips into his greedy mouth.

"*Dunno, Jaco*, I wasn't really listening to your *convo*?" I reply, lowering gears to take the next corner.

"That is because you can't concentrate when you're sober, so let's stop at the *bottlo*, everyone knows, *Kono* is an *Alco*." Jax grins at me, with a mouthful of crushed up chipos.

*Cheeky motherfucker!*

I scowl at him, light-heartedly. "*Righto*, but we'll still need to stop at the *Servo* in the *arvo*—"

"Stop talking, you *Deros*, you're making me *aggro*," Elise snickers, kicking both our headrests from the backseat. We both crack up laughing, twisting around to stare at each other.

Elise and Jax continue to verbally abuse each other—or *flirt*. I glance in the rear-view mirror and catch a glimpse of Blesk. Her cheek rests on Elise's shoulder, her blonde hair spread around, her eyes are closed to the world and her headphones are in—she has never looked so peaceful. Her head bobs slightly to an inaudible beat, and her face is relaxed.

She looks like she's never had a bad experience in her life. She looks content. I haven't seen that look on her before. I peer back at the road. Then back at her again. Then back to the road.

*What is she listening to?* Whatever it is, it's my new favourite song. I need to be beside her. I pull over and slam on the brakes, jolting us to a standstill with more force than intended.

"What the hell?" Jax yells as the Prado comes to a complete stop.

I spin in my seat and look at Elise and Jax. "I can't concentrate. I need to sit next to Blesk... Elise, get up front." I crawl in the back.

Elise pushes her glasses up the bridge of her nose. "Fine, Jaxon, get ready to learn how to drive a stick properly."

"Whoa!" Jax stares at me and shrugs questioningly, mouthing, "What the?"

Elise jumps out, walks around the car, and pulls herself up into the driver's seat. I smirk at Jax while she's outside and mouth, "I think she likes you." He tries to hide his flattered expression, but I catch it.

Blesk has woken from her music coma and is sitting up, observing us intently. She is alert and her head is high as she gazes around with the music still monopolising her hearing. She grins at me and her tongue comes out between her teeth. I have to have it. I lean in and suck her tongue into my mouth, pulling her into me. I can feel the vibrations of her hum against my lips and chest as she melts against me.

I slide my hand up into her hair, deepening our kiss. Loving every second her lips allow me the pleasure of their touch, loving their silky moistness, loving the moans that escape them, and loving the way her tongue massages mine. Loving everything about it, and everything about her.

The car starts to move forward, and we conclude our kiss so I can get my belt on. I signal for her to take out one of her earplugs, motioning with my hand. She grins at me, tugging a plug from my ear.

"What are you listening to, Duch?" I ask.

"The Lumineers," she says, with her smile and sparkling eyes that wrench my heart. She brushes my hair away from my ear and puts the loose earplug in it. She kisses my cheek then rests her head on my shoulder without any further contemplation, nestling into me and relaxing. I wrap my arm around her and pull her as close as possible, kissing her forehead. I can hear the two miscreants bickering in the front seat, but Blesk doesn't seem to register them at all. Her expression is perfectly content, and now she is in my arms. My heart is full.

All I want for her is peace... with me. She raises her leg and folds it over mine. She has never looked more beautiful than she does right now, bopping her head to the beat only we can hear, in her yoga pants, in her singlet, with no makeup on and bare feet.

Her basic is every other girl's spectacular.

\*\*\*

I would rather have a holiday with Hitler than be here. I would rather be on the beach in the first scene of *Saving Private Ryan* than be here. I would rather be a blonde prostitute in *American Psycho*, than be here. For some reason, it never occurred to me that I may have an adverse reaction to seeing a prison. To seeing a huge cage. To seeing a place without escape. To seeing captive humans.

The barbed wire, the layers of fences, the barred windows, and cold steep walls are my personal *hell*. My whole body fights the urge to vomit as we pull into the visitor's parking bay. My face pales, and it happens so quickly I feel every bloody cell rushing out, draining my cheeks. I completely stop breathing. I have one feeling. Only one. Panic.

*Fuck!*

Jaxon and Elise twist back to look at me. I'm wide-eyed, frozen, blanched, unreachable. They're talking, but I can't hear them. Their mouths move, their faces distort, their heads tilt, but I can't hear anything. Panic has its claws around my throat, and I can't breathe, can't think. Everything around me moves slower than is normal, slower than feasible. Then I hear something, and although it is muffled, I know I need to respond.

"Listen. Konnor. Listen. It's Blesk . . ." Her voice trails off.

I turn to look at her and see that her mouth is moving, forming my name..

But I don't hear anything.

Like a damn tsunami, the air smashes back into me and I fly forward, gasping for oxygen. When I feel her sweet touch on my thigh, all of the sounds in the world suddenly get sucked straight into my head and I hear them all at once. They are yelling my name.

*Fucking loud.*

I grasp my ears, both hands covering my head.



“Fuck! Stop yelling!” I scream.

“Konnor, baby.” Blesk places her palms on either side of my face and kisses my forehead. I force my hands away from my ears and down to my sides. I will the tension shredding my spine to yield, to subside. Her lips touch my cheek, soft and moist and loving. She kisses my chin. She kisses me with everything she has and everything she is feeling. They each convey a new meaning. That she understands, that she is petrified for me, and that she is here. She is living this nightmare vicariously through me. I shouldn’t act like this.

*Ridiculous, pathetic, emasculating...*

*Weak piece of shit...*

*Your girl needs you.*

*I don’t want her to see me like this.*

“Stop, don’t touch me. I’m fine,” I say curtly, trying to evade eye contact. I shrug her off, waving her hands from my face. I’m too in my head, too angry at myself. My rejection shocks her, but she doesn’t surrender, grabbing my cheeks with more force and searching my expression empathetically. When she kisses my lips again I cease avoiding her, defeated by her warmth. Her lips oppress every other erupting emotion. She pulls away and looks me dead in the eyes, offering me exactly what I need: acceptance, tolerance, understanding, and love. She knows what is happening. I need her. I need her more than anything.

She hushes me. “Shhhhhh, baby.” She pulls me into her chest, rocking me against her until my heart slows.

*Breathe, Konnor.*

“I don’t think I can move, Duch.”

My voice sounds strange, like it isn’t my own. “I’m trying to move my feet. I’m trying to, but they won’t budge. I’m supposed to look after you and I can’t even move right now. I can’t go in there.” I suck a sharp breath in and try to regulate my heart’s rhythm.

She strokes my hair. “We’re looking after each other, remember? *We’re looking after each other.*”

Jax grimaces. “What the hell is going on with you, dude?” he yells before jumping from the car, slamming the door behind him.

“Jax!” I call after him.

He turns to hide his face and stares across the field that surrounds the penitentiary. He grips the back of his head, and rubs his hands forward

through his hair, a clear action to convey his frustration. I know it's unfair to ask him to continue watching all this drama unfold without some kind of explanation.

*Fuck, I need a drink...*

"Don't worry, I'll talk to him." Elise pats my arm, and swings open the car door before joining Jax's side. Their conversation is inaudible from inside the Prado, but their body language is quite distinct. She places a tender hand on his back as they exchange words, his arms jolt around, and his head shakes.

I look at Blesk. "You can't go in, this was a mistake, a *huge* mistake." She sighs. "No, it wasn't."

"Yes, it really was," I mutter.

"We need answers. I'm getting them."

*Hell no!*

"You're not going in there without me." I shake my head. "There's no way."

She smiles at me with big comforting eyes. "I can do this."

"You're kidding, right? That man beat you for years. He ruined your life. There is no way you are going in there alone."

Her expression tightens. "Konnor!"

"No, Duchess, not without me, it isn't open for negotiation."

She takes a strengthening breath. "I have to do this for you and for me. I can do this."

"Nope," I state, dismissing what she just said. "Not happening, just let it *go!*"

"Stop it. You said we would look after each other, but you don't believe I can hold up my end of that bargain. I need you to support me and let me do this. I can do this, Konnor. Why don't you believe I can?"

My chest deflates. "Duchess, you can do anything you want, anything you put your mind to, you are the *bravest* person I've ever met." I grin at her and exhale on a sigh. "Once upon a time there was a little girl who stood up to her abusive father and helped her best friend escape the prison, he was in for four years. You risked everything when you did that, and you did it completely alone, you faced him alone. I will be *damned* if you have to face him alone again."

She looks down at her feet, contemplating something, and then twists back to me. "I will take Elise in with me."

I sigh again, exasperated, and work my jaw as I consider her proposal. She is sitting tall, with an edginess to her that looks incredibly hot. She needs to do this—with or without me. This is one of those times when she needs my support and not my protection, even though it scares the shit out of me. Because she is right... she can do this.

*Have faith in her, Konnor....*

I roll my eyes reluctantly. “*Fine*, Duchess, but you do not tell him anything, hear me? Nothing! If it means he doesn’t give you any information, then fine, don’t mention your name, your university, anything, understand?”

“He thinks I’m dead,” she says. “Remember?”

“Yeah, so he’s gonna have questions.” The more I talk, the sicker I feel. The more I contemplate the conversation, the more I hesitate.

“Konnor,” she says, perhaps trying to pacify me. “He won’t be able to find me. I live in a different town, I live a different life, with a different name. I will be fine. I’m going to tell him who I am. But give him nothing else.”

I massage my temples. “Kiss me,” I order. She leans in and presses her mouth to mine. Her tongue teases my lips, and I fist her hair, pulling her in more deeply, desperately. I love her. *God*, do I love her. The thought of someone hurting her kills me. I pull away and stare at her. “Be careful.”

A subtle and yet resolute smile crosses her face. “He can’t hurt me in there.”

I press my palm to her heart. “Here... He can hurt you in here.”

Her face softens. “No, he can’t. Not anymore.”

I watch her walk with Elise through both layers of fencing, then enter the sliding doors. Every step seems exaggerated, every little glance over her shoulder seems like a goodbye and every muscle in me wants to run to her even as my every thought goes to the darkest place it can find. I step outside the car and pace. I pace back and forth like an animal, like an animal in a cage. A big, human-holding cage.

*Dammit!*

My expression is tight, and my molars are clamped together as I make my way towards Jax, slumping down on the grass near his feet. My back hits the ground hard when my legs buckle, and I wince as the wind gets knocked from me.

He drops down beside me on the grass, and we both stare at the sky. I can feel my brows knit together so tightly, that today will probably imprint

permanent worry lines on my forehead, each of which is for Blesk. I've never been to a prison, never spoken to anyone who has. *Will the guards search her or Elise?* The thought alone makes my ears radiate with heat. *What if her dad tries to touch her? What if he lunges at her?* I groan at the thought and rub my face roughly with both hands.

"Say something," I groan at Jax, wanting him to take my mind off the images in my head. "You *clearly* have something to say, so just fucking say it."

He scoffs. "Fine, I will. This isn't normal. This whole thing, you and her, the intensity of it. You have started doing this *awesome* new thing where you phase out, and it is just fucking magical. I mean, really, it's like you aren't even there anymore. It's really freaking me out, and yet you won't tell me what's going on. It's fucked up and it's making you act like a psycho."

I entwine my fingers and cup the back of my head with my palms. "Maybe I was always a psycho. You just didn't know it."

He mimics my position. "I've known you for a while now and have never seen you act the way you have over the past month. You've known this girl for, like, what? five seconds? And you worship her. Whenever she's around, you're in this weird daze, like you're not even Konnor anymore."

I grunt and spin my head to flash him a serious look. "You need to stop talking about Duch like that, or we won't be coming back from this conversation."

"See, like that! It's irrational."

"It isn't fucking irrational. I just won't lay here and hear a bad word spoken about her, so cut it out."

He makes eye contact with me momentarily, and then turns back to the sky. "Listen, Konnor, the past month you have been acting crazy, missing practice, missing games, missing class, missing fucking grad classes. You're gonna fail."

"*Oh, come on,*" I groan. "It has been *one* fucking month, get over it."

"It has been a month, one month of you acting like a complete lunatic," he says gruffly.

I roll my eyes. "I have known her a lot longer than you. I've known her for seventeen years."

"*Riiiiiiight.*" He drawls. "When you were children."

My jaw suddenly gets tight, and I growl, “Don’t say it like that! You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He releases a sharp, exasperated breath. “Well, then tell me!”

“I can’t,” I snap.

“I like B. You know I do. She’s a cool chick. But you two are crazy together. Way, way too intense. Too, I don’t know . . . Just too much. I keep feeling like I need to watch out for shrapnel cuz you’re gonna explode at any moment.”

He’s so right. “Yeah, I feel like that, too,” I mumble.

“You know that isn’t normal, right?” I notice in my peripheral vision that he has twisted to look at my side profile, attempting to gain more of my attention. Perhaps, even convince me with his severity. “That kind of intensity? You are meant to improve each other’s lives, not derail them.”

I frown at the sky, and then turn to acknowledge him. “No, it isn’t normal. It’s *phenomenal*! Every goddamn part of it. Her hands, her lips, everything. And I’m totally okay with the intensity. I’ve been in love with her forever, since before I can remember anyone else, and I am not ashamed to say it. I don’t care if I sound like a pussy. I just don’t care. Her face has more familiarity, seems more like family, and has more connections to the word *home* than any other face on earth. We are working through things at the moment, Jax. Things will get better; it just isn’t a quick fix.”

He sighs sadly, his shoulders deflating with the effort. “I don’t understand, dude.” He shakes his head. “I just don’t get it.”

I clear my throat. “Your mum or dad, your sister, their faces... they are the clearest things from your childhood, right? Your aunties, friends even? You have memories of them and of the things you did. You probably even have photos. *All* I have is her. Her memory, *our* memory, memories of the childhood we shared with just the two of us, *our life*.”

“We are one, bound together by circumstance. All I remember from before I was nine is *her*. There is nothing wrong with *us*; Konnor and Blesk are great. We always have been, even from the start. This issue is who we were when we were kids and what happened to us. We just need time to figure out how we can put our past and present together.”

Jaxon groans, frustrated. “*Please*, for *fuck’s sake*, give me more than that, dude. That makes fuck-all sense. I’m worried about you.”

“Okay, Jax! Okay! But not many people know this. My shrink. My family knows what happened, obviously, because they adopted me, and

Elise knows because Blesk wanted her to, but no one else. Not even Drake.”

He scoffs. “Don’t do me any fav—”

“I want to tell you.”

And I do. I tell him everything. I try not to watch his expression as I run through the events of the past seventeen years, but I can tell he is getting choked up.

He never makes a peep.

To my surprise by the end of my story I’m smiling. Because, even though I am on display, all of me, I’m also free. The sun flickers above me, the trees move in the wind and the grass is soft beneath my back. After hearing my story again, in its entirety, I realise it’s almost over. We are so close to truly moving on now. And I have Blesk, my Duchess.

I chew on the inside of my lip in contemplation. “There are a lot of things about me that are a result of that experience,” I admit to Jaxon. “I play them off, of course, as personality idiosyncrasies, but they aren’t... they’re scars. Some of these I’ll *never* share with Duch. I don’t need her feeling any more guilt.

“The first year after I got out, I got sick, *a lot*. I wasn’t used to all the germs people carried, and I was pretty much always on some kind of antihistamines or antibiotics. My system was shot to hell. I never felt... *right*, ya know? Even though I knew the world was big it still kinda scared me.”

We both sigh and continue to blink at the sun overhead. Jax’s expression is stiff and concerned, unwavering in its fight to not offer ubiquitous comfort, and obvious in its overwhelming need to.

“You’ll laugh at this,” I continue with a sheepish chuckle, “but, ah, I was shy once. If it wasn’t for two boisterous sisters, then I might have disappeared altogether. They forced me out of my shell and I mean literally, *forced*.” I laugh, reminiscing.

“When I had my first drink with Flick, it was like it enlightened me. With that in my system I had courage, I was funny, I was impenetrable, and... I felt closer to the boy in the basement because my experience was similar. I was in a bit of a daze in that cell, mate. The drugs I was given warped the way I saw things.” Hesitation changes my tone, dropping it to barely a choked whisper. “The thing I’ve never told anyone, *ever*, Cassidy, Flick or my shrink, is... I missed the basement. I missed it because it had

become me. And it was where we shared a life. In that room, I got to be with her all the time, every day. And then I was alone, and it was scary. I was scared all the time...

"I slowly moved on. I started to cope without her and without the basement. And yet, the last few weeks, without Blesk... for the first time in several years... I missed the basement all over again."

Relieved that I finally said it, I lay back against the grass and stare at the clouds, exhausted but happy. Suddenly a silhouette blocks my view. Blesk straddles me, one foot on either side of my waist, and peers down at me. She is lined in silver from the sun's beams and looks like an angel. Relief floods me.

"Hey there, Mr. Slater, come here often?" she asks, with a cheeky wiggle of her brows. I sit up and grab her knees, buckling them down until she is straddling me. Her incredible arse comes down and meets my thighs. I shuffle her in against me and her breath catches on impact with my body, her warmth seeping into me and calming my nerves.

*Christ, I can't lose her again.*

"Miss Bellamy, what's a girl like you doing outside a place like this?" I ask, purposely displaying both dimples when I grin.

Elise's chuckles. "Aww, you two are hopeless!"

Jax scoffs and jumps to his feet. "*Fuck's sake*, have your menstrual cycles synced or something?" He wipes his eyes and snuffles back the emotions he's still trying to conceal due to my confessions.

"*Jealous*," Blesk says in a singsong voice, beaming sweetly up at him.

"No," he states. "Because I find my balls and spine both necessary."

Elise chuckles. "They're cute."

"Kill me if I ever act like that," Jax mutters to Elise.

I completely ignore them and keep my eyes trained on Blesk's playful grin, which is creasing her cheeks and widening her lips. Her lips are so kissable right now. If Jax and Elise weren't here, my hands would be roaming her perfect body. I lean in to kiss her, but she pulls away teasingly and giggles. I *tut* her with my tongue and thread my hands under her backside, forcing her into me harder.

"Do you want that Distinction, Miss Bellamy?"

"I thought all I had to do was show up?" she challenges me, resting her forearms on my shoulders, and running her delicate fingers through the back of my hair.

“That was before I knew your potential.” I lean in again and wrap my mouth around her lower lip, sucking and tugging on it. She goes limp on my lap and moans into my mouth, both of us momentarily losing ourselves in each other, in our kiss, in our moans. I sulk when she reluctantly pulls away from me, flashing a look at our company. I lick the remnants of her taste off my lips, hating how often we have to part.

*Damn she tastes good.*

“So...” I say apprehensively. “Tell me how it went. Tell me everything.”

She slides off my lap, and I immediately feel her absence all around me. I frown as she positions herself cross-legged beside me. Her face turns serious as she mentally prepares to have what I know will be one of the hardest conversations of our lives.

“Well, firstly, we went through the doors and were greeted by guards. They escorted us to the administration desk so we could sign in and collect our visitor’s badges. I signed in as Blesk Bellamy. The lady was nice. She prepared us for the following few steps and told me prisoner 94018 Donovan Knight, would only be given my first name. Elise and I decided it would be best if only I spoke to him, just in case he baits us and only I realise it. After we waited for a few minutes, we were asked to enter a separate room. In this room, a sniffer dog walked around us. If it had of sat down in front of us, we would have been declined entry.”

“Searching for drugs?” I query.

“Yeah, among other things,” Elise says, and sits beside Blesk. “After we left that room, we were guided into what looked like a school cafeteria. We sat together and waited. There was a guard at every corner of the room. It wasn’t until I was sitting that I started to feel nervous. I sat very still, very stiff, and was definitely on edge.

“When the door to the prison cell block opened, I flinched. The inmates passed the threshold, all in green prison scrubs, and I felt myself stop breathing. I remember consciously telling myself to breathe, over and over. I recognised him immediately. I wasn’t sure I would, because I couldn’t picture him in my head at all. I tried many times, but his face always came up blank. But when I saw his icy blue eyes and the way he holds himself; I knew it was him. I locked my jaw and remained sitting tall. I held my head high. I kept stoic. Elise grabbed my hand under the table and squeezed. I couldn’t have portrayed such artificial strength without her.



“He sat opposite me and smirked, smug and insufferable. I thought maybe I would feel something. Maybe I would remember I loved him once, that he loved me once, but I felt nothing. I thought maybe I would feel a connection, that he did the best he could do, with what little he had to give. That perhaps he loved me as much as a man of his calibre was capable of. But I felt nothing for him other than some fragments of pent-up hate and fear.

“He leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms over his chest, staring at me with formidable arrogance. We sat in silence for at least five minutes, but I refused to be the first to break it. Then he rested his elbows on the table and leaned forward. ‘You have your mother’s eyes, Lizzy,’ he said. He knew straight away. He knew it was me. I cringed when he called me that, and unfortunately, it was too noticeable because he then laughed. Elise squeezed my hand again.

“I said, ‘Why did you take him?’ That was all I could get out. That was it.

“He leaned back again and sank into the chair, still smiling smugly. ‘You’re pretty. You’re prettier than your mother,’ he said. I snorted, and he chuckled again at my response. So, I just said, ‘Why?’ again. He scowled at me and signalled the guard. I thought he was going to leave. When the guard approached, he spoke into his ear. He laughed with the guard then said, ‘Yeah boss, she’s a knock out.’ I cringed. Then he stood and walked out, peering over his shoulder to look at me one last time before disappearing around the corner.

“I wasn’t sure if I was mad, or disappointed, or sad. I was sad for you. I felt like I failed you and it was a waste of time. We had to wait for a few minutes to leave. Maybe, five minutes later we were walking from the cafeteria when the guard my father had spoken to stopped us. My heart leaped into my throat. He asked me to hold my arms out and stand still then ran his hands up and down my sides, putting something covertly in my pocket. He tapped the pocket twice, then said, ‘Clear’ and told me to move along. That was it, that was all that happened.” She has a half-smile on her face, but the creases between her brows reveal her true unease. Her hand goes behind her and she removes something from her back pocket. A piece of paper. It’s light, yet it should somehow be weighing down my hand with its significance.

I gesture to the inanimate object in my hand. "This is it. It seems inadequate, almost."

She shrugs. "I haven't read it, but please don't get your hopes up."

"Yeah, mate, for all you know it says, '*fuck you, have a nice day*'," Jax says, looking down at us on the grass. Elise and Jax both watch me intently as I take a big breath and then unfold the note.

*Lizzy*

*It is all yours...you've earnt it...*

*Safety deposit box 101, 45 South Side Street Moorup.*

*2217*

*Daddy*

"He's such an asshole." I scrunch up the piece of paper in my hand, loathing it. "This is a joke." My knuckles turn white around the note, and it becomes apparent I'm never going to get any answers, and I was pathetic for thinking that maybe I would. I jump up and punch at the air, hating myself for hoping, and trying to release the tension slithering down my limbs. "Fuck!"

"Slater, maybe there is actually something in that box?" Jax states.

"Nah, fuck it!" I shake my head fanatically, scowling at the world in general.

I hear her sweet sigh, and then she mutters, "Baby, we're going to Moorup to look in the box."

"You have to. I mean, if you don't, you'll always wonder," Elise says.

I snort. "No, we don't. That is exactly what he wants, and for all we know someone is going to meet us there and finish what they started in the hospital that day." As soon as the words pass my lips, I want to rip my own head off. Blesk's face drops, and I did that, I'm responsible for that sad look.

*You're an asshole, Konnor.*

Elise's hand goes to her mouth. "Konnor!"

Blesk gasps. "Don't ever say stuff like that, Konnor! Oh my God." She bounces to her feet and walks towards the car, sniffing and wiping at her eyes.

"There could be some truth in it, though," Jax calls out, watching Blesk walk away.

“*Shit!*” I growl and take my anger out on the grass below my feet, kicking it and stomping. I spin and jog after her, cursing my lack of tact. She leans against the car and folds her arms across her chest, frowning and sulking at me as I approach. Cutest little pout, cutest little sulk. Thank God I’ve never seen this face before, because it renders my own will obsolete. I would do anything for this little sulking face. Placing both palms beside her head on the car, I force a smile and stare directly into her pooled eyes.

“Duchess,” my voice softens, “I’m sorry. I should never talk like that, and if you want to go, then we’ll go.”

She sniffs back a tear and glances down at her feet, shuffling them in the dirt. “He wrote you *‘earnt it,’*” she whispers, her voice cracking with each word. “Like I earnt whatever prize he has for keeping you kidnapped, like I was his accomplice of something.”

She peers up at me as a tear drops from the corner of her eye and glides slowly down her cheek.

I wipe it away with the side of my finger. “He’s an asshole, Duch. He wants to hurt you. He probably knows you blame yourself.”

“I know,” she says sadly. “But it still makes me feel sick.”

Sighing, I brush her hair back with my hand, her golden locks slip through my fingers like silk. I remind myself how lucky I am to have her, how lucky I am to touch her, and how incredibly lucky I am that every time I touch her, she moves into me, letting me know she wants me, too. Nothing else matters.

“I love you, Duchess. You know that, right?” I say.

She nods. “I just . . . I was hoping to feel some kind of family connection, anything. He is the only person I know who shares the same blood as me,” she mumbles, dropping her head back on the car.

“I’m your family.” I pull her into my chest and hug her against me before peering over my shoulder and calling out, “Looks like we’re going back to The District.”

## TWENTY: Blesk

I spent my life from the age of eight in a city called Connolly, which is part of four sister cities in a section of Western Australia, notoriously known as The District. It has a lot of corruption, and organised crime, and for this very reason, there is almost no petty criminal activity of any kind. It consists mainly of families—big, wealthy families. On the outside, The District appears to be the perfect place to raise children, with its excellent universities and clean streets.

My parents are of humble origin within this prosperous area. I remained under the radar for most of my youth. While my brother went to Connolly High and quickly made a name for himself, I went to an all-girls school, Saint Martha's, and stayed purposefully out of the spotlight. Konnor grew up in The District as well, but his family lived in the sister city, Brussman. Connolly, Brussman, Moorup and Stormy River make up this section of the countryside, and are all connected by a common river, Stormy River. I didn't think I'd be back so soon, but because my biological father's farm is on the outskirts of The District the nears town is Morrurp, and that is where the locker is.

When I place my hand on Konnor's leg, he flashes me a sweet smile before turning back to concentrate on the road. It still surprises me that whenever we touch, I can feel the ripples of our feelings rush through my veins. A month ago, when he stepped up onto that stage, and everyone went wild, I knew he was special. He spoke eloquently and engagingly about the importance of education. His words have more significance now that I understand their deeper meaning. For over four years he was denied the right to an education, and now he is teaching others; he is enabling them. I am so proud of the person he has become. He walks the walk and talks the talk and is everything I could ever want in a friend and lover. My chest feels airy and my stomach is doing flips as I stare at his profile. I'm completely unable to screen the emotions filling me, because I know now that I *am* in

love with him. Without him, I wouldn't feel the way I do now—proud. I am proud of myself for the first time in my life. Facing my father took every ounce of strength I possess, but I did it.

I didn't run.

*One day I will tell him how I feel. One day I will thank him.*

Jaxon sighs from the backseat. "Ya know, my mum used to foster kids. After my dad left mum, she started filling her life with strangers and their kids. Like a damn hostel for the bohemian."

"Sorry, that sounds like it could have been hard," I say, wondering why he decided to share this now and feeling guilty for not having something better than sorry to say.

"I'm not trying to overshare or anything, but today kinda reminded me of growing up in that house."

"What happened?" Elise asks, her voice soft and cautious.

"My mum became a parent to lots of needy kids. I'm not sure when, but at some point, that became everything she was, and we had a constant influx of people and kids through the house."

"You never told me that," Konnor says, glancing into the rear-view mirror. I squeeze Konnor's leg and try desperately to think of something to say.

"I learned something about family then that kind of expanded its meaning for me. Because I was raised by so many people: my parent's closest friend, and a revolving door of her boyfriends, and all those kids and random people from God only knows were. It's not like I'm dark about that. My mum loves me, and I got to pick and choose whose advice I'd take." He glances at me and his expression softens. "I'm getting off-track, but I've never been good at explaining things. What I'm trying to say is, family is based on behaviour, not blood. We are your family, Blesk, and you find loyalty in the strangest places."

I smile. "Thanks, Jaxon."

Elise feigns a snivel and says, "Who is this guy?"

"You have all of us, Duch," Konnor mutters, squeezing our fingers together. Then he coughs, "pussy," jokingly under his breath.

"Shut up, dickhead," Jaxon says. "Right... I have this sudden urge to go hunting or do something else equally as manly, like boxing, maybe. Does anyone have any trash they need taking out?"

Elise chuckles. “We still think you’re manly, Jaxon, no need to compensate.” She leans in and wraps her arms around the back of my headrest, smothering my face, and adds, “love you, Wally.”

I pull her arms down below my head and say, “You go alright, my Delinquent Family.”

Jaxon cracks up laughing, and slumps back into his seat. “Delinquent Family? Yeah, okay, I’m in.”

As we roll over the Brussman Bridge, I’m overwhelmed by its grandeur and height. This city is thriving, rich in wealth, and... rich in gossip. I can see the streets of Moorup from above, streets that appear akin to veins pulsing through this living city. As we approach 45 South Street Moorup, we find ourselves rolling into the visitors parking for the Trans Moorup inter-district rail-line. Elise and I stay in the car while Jaxon and Konnor go inside to ask for assistance and look for the locker room. They are going to get the lay of the land and then come back to see us before actually approaching it. I highly doubt my father has managed to organise an ambush since speaking with me less than two hours ago. Nevertheless, we are all prickly with nervous energy. My fingers are finding anything to fidget with as we anxiously wait.

This train station has several floors, with the inclined floors for bus transportation and parking, and the lower floors for trains. The locker could be on any level. Security at city stations of this size are usually second to none... or so I keep telling myself. The words from my father’s letter keep flashing in my head. I feel I’ve missed something. *It is all yours... you’ve earned it.* What is all mine? The information? Money? Why would he give me anything if he wanted me dead? Why would he want me dead? Because I could testify against him? They didn’t need my testimony because he pleaded guilty. It is all nonsensical.

Whenever my brain has a spot for anything other than my father or Konnor, it is filled with Erik. Lying in that hospital bed. My feelings are conflicting, my *stomach* aches for the little boy who held me in his arms while I cried at night, who went without sleep, who dragged me lifeless from a pool of my own blood, and still never blamed me for a second of his misery.

But then my *heart* aches at the thought of what he did to me.

I twist in my seat, peering back at Elise, words on the edge of my tongue.

Elise breaks the silence. "What are you thinking about, Wally? You have that little dimpled brow thing happening."

Trying to relax my face, I reply, "What dimpled brow thing?"

She chuckles and points at my profile. "That one!"

"Honestly? I was thinking about Erik."

Elise slumps into the upholstery and crosses her arms, tilting her head questioningly. "And?"

"I just don't understand. I just feel like there has to be an explanation, that he was sick, or on drugs or drunk, but it wasn't him, and I know he loves me."

She takes an exaggerated breath in and out. "It's hard to understand why anyone would put up with what you have, it really is. But then... Okay, so before I say this, please don't think I agree with you, because I *don't*. I don't think he should ever be forgiven. But I just want you to know I'm actively trying to understand your stance on this subject. So, here I go.

"The first time I met you, I thought Erik was your boyfriend because of the way he looked at you. It was pretty clear he adored you. He watched you move; he watched your mouth when you spoke. Then, when you said he was your brother I was like, wow, I wish I had a brother because he seriously loves you. I wish I had someone who adores me that much. Yes, I don't deny he loves you. But even if he was drunk, even if he was on drugs, does that make what he did okay? You cried, Blesk. You cried while he forced himself on you. So, at what point is it *not* okay? One more chance, two more?"

I listen to everything she says and try to absorb it. This event hurts just as much as every hit I've endured at the hand of my father. Contemplating a life without Erik is unfathomable, because he kept me sane, kept me safe.

*I am alive because of him.*

"One more chance? I'll tell him it was wrong. I'll stand up to him for the first time, *ever*. And I'll tell him that Konnor and I are together," I say and search her expression impatiently for approval.

She pauses and then shakes her head, just once. My stomach aches.

"No," she states adamantly. "No chances. Do you want to know why? It isn't for the reason you think. If Erik was willing to gain back your trust and never so much as look at you as more than his sister again, then I would say

maybe and that it's up to you. I'd say he can still be a part of your life, if that would make you happy. But I'm saying *no*. No chances. Not for you... but for Konnor." Her voice breaks. "Because seeing what he saw that day must have really mess with his head. We both know going down there would have destroyed him. I mean, look at him today! He couldn't even look at the prison. Which, mind you, is fair enough. I went crazy when I fractured both my legs and spent eight weeks inside with my nanny. Imagine four years. I don't know how he isn't *more* stuffed up. But that day he went down there, chasing after your cries, and then saw what he saw. You can't put that sweet boy in the same room as Erik. You can't ask Konnor to be okay with you being in the same room with Erik when he isn't there. You mean so much to him. You just can't ask that of him."

Everything she says has me barely holding myself together, because she's so right; I can't do that to Konnor. Whether I show it or not, he means more to me than life itself, and Erik and anyone else. If this decision is based on his happiness, then I'm in. Part of me feels sick for not seeing it that way to start with.

Elise leans forward and touches my knee. "Stop, Wally, I know that look. Stop self-hating. There's too much going on in your head, and you've faced some crazy hurdles today that most people couldn't even comprehend. I think you should trust Konnor enough to talk to him about it too, because he's reasonable and has your best interests at heart. But you need to attempt to make decisions that consider his feelings, too, because he will only think about yours. He needs some looking after as well. I worry about you, Wally, I do, but to be honest, I also know I don't need to, because Konnor will love you and look out for you... if *you* let him."

I nod. "I'm going to love him and look out for him, too."

She beams at me. "Good to hear, because love you he does."

"Love him I do," I whisper, the words sounding so nice to actually hear out loud.

"Tell him you should," she mutters knowingly.

I jump when both car doors swing open, still immersed in the deep conversation I just had with Elise. Konnor moves in behind the wheel and Jax slumps down behind me, the energy in the car shifting as they glance hesitantly at one another.

"What have you two done?" I ask, squinting at them.



“Nothing.” Konnor chuckles evasively and flashes Jaxon a “busted” kind of look. “We haven’t done anything.”

“Why are you both grinning at each other like that?” Elise probes.

“We just got some stuff for you,” Jaxon says, and pulls a Pez out from his back pocket, handing it to Elise. “I got you the Daenerys Mother of Dragons, Pez style.” His lips curve up to the side as Elise’s eyes widen.

*And I’m completely missing something?*

She snatches it from him and holds it to her chest, exhaling slowly.

“Explain?” I query, my eyes shifting around the car. Elise sinks into her chair with the Pez clutched tightly to her heart, a big dopey smile stretching from ear-to-ear.

She melts into a sigh. “I told Jaxon and Konnor last time we went driving that I hadn’t been on a real road trip before. They were horrified. Anyway, now apparently Pez is one of the major staples of a road trip. But Jaxon couldn’t find any. I also told them about my two mums, who are both lawyers. Which, by the way, they seemed *awkwardly* eager to hear about,” she teases.

I cock an eyebrow at Konnor. “Were they just?”

“I don’t know what you are implying, Elise, but I object.” Konnor laughs.

“Lawyer jokes,” Jaxon guffaws, taking on a pose to obstruct an incoming hand or fist from Elise.

Elise hisses at them playfully. “Shut up you two delinquents... So, Jaxon and I had lunch a few days ago, and he dared to challenge my woman-power—”

“*Oh no, he didn’t,*” Konnor cuts in. I crack up laughing as he twerks his finger and bobbles his head. His smile, his playfulness, his confidence... it is the most extraordinary thing I’ve ever seen, and I love it.

*I love him, and I love the look in his eyes, right now.*

Jaxon snorts. “I didn’t challenge your woman-power or whatever you just said, *thank you*. I just said growing up without a masculine presence would have been hard, and there is no wonder she is so...I dunno, little and quaint and shit.”

“‘And shit!’” Konnor mocks. Then we all laugh, because Elise isn’t the least bit quaint.

“He said no wonder I was so fragile and girly. He said *fragile and girly*. I said, having only mothers has made me way fiercer than if I’d grown up

with a father. Women are crazy protective and extremely resilient. Women have been squashed for thousands of years and have only been given a real voice in the past fifty. I said, look at what we have accomplished in that time. I told him that he wouldn't want to see me mad because I am fiery."

I exhale with realisation. "Ah, and so he got you a Mother of Dragons Pez. Aw, that's kind of sweet."

She grins at me with a new look, a goofy, Elise-in-love look. "Yeah."

Konnor leans in and kisses my cheeks, running his lips quickly across to my chin, and then giving me a chaste peck on the mouth. He opens the car door and steps out, caution flashing in his eyes.

"Don't get upset okay? Just be happy," Konnor says apprehensively, and leans down beside the tyre, winking at me as he fiddles around with something on the floor. As he rises again, he has a white cardboard cake box in his hand and a pleased smile fixed to his face. He moves inside the car and flashes a look at Jaxon, before putting the box into my eagerly outstretched arms.

"This is from Jax, Elise, and me. We know that you missed out on a lot of birthday cakes over the years. And we wanted to rectify that. We got you twenty cupcakes, one for every birthday your real family missed, because we didn't mean to miss them, and will never miss another one again"

"This is such a *Wallflower* moment," Elise says, with a grin.

I stare at the box open-mouthed and wide-eyed. This moment right now is the happiest of my entire life; this moment right now rivals every happy moment anyone has ever experienced. This moment means more to me than I could ever express, and these people—my family—mean more to me than I could ever show them. But I will try to start showing them how I love them.

I don't try to stop the tears, because this crying I like. This kind makes every other tear worth crying.

"Thank you," I say. "Thank you so much."

"What flavour are the cupcakes?" Elise asks.

"All different, I think," Konnor says. "We got them from this little bakery in the station." I pass the cake box back to Elise, and she places it on the seat between her and Jaxon. Konnor leans in, pulling me over the centre console and onto his lap, engulfing me in his arms as I lose a few of those awesome tears, those happy tears, those tears of joy.

“And now don’t get mad, Duch, please.” Konnor hands me an A4 yellow envelope, and my face immediately crumbles, squinting down at it. I slide from his lap and back into the seat beside him, unease stirring my belly. He looks nervous, which makes *me* nervous. My fingers wrap around the envelope, and I fake a grin while searching his guilty face, a grin that says, “*This isn’t what I think it is, is it?*”

“Duchess, we didn’t go to the locker. We asked a security guard to go for us, and tipped him handsomely, might I add. He didn’t seem too fazed at all, and then returned with this. I know you are probably mad I didn’t discuss it with you first, but I’m just relieved it is done. So... that’s it.”

“I’m not mad.” I crinkle the envelope in my hand and hold it to my stomach, my breath quickening. The first part of accepting my new friends, my new family, is to trust them and their decisions. “I’m freaked out, and I’m not happy you took a risk without discussing it with me first.”

“We knew you’d say no, and we were there,” Jaxon says, leaning forward onto his knees. “And the guy at the desk approached us, and it just felt like a natural thing to ask and organise. So we just did it without thinking.”

“You cheeky devils, you buttered us up first with cakes and Pez,” Elise says, still clutching her gift tightly.

“Yeah, we really did,” Jaxon admits clumsily.

“Did it work?” Konnor asks, searching my wide-eyed expression with a tiny bit of unease.

I lick my lips which are now ridiculously dry.

Clearing my throat, I say, “Yes, it worked.”

“So, what now?” Jaxon asks. “The anticipation is killing me.”

As my eyes explore the envelope in my hand, I begin to feel sick. Part of me fears its contents, and part of me is excited to finally set it free. Konnor puts his hand on my knee and stares at me, his expression soft and knowing.

“Wanna blow it up?” Konnor asking jokingly.

“Or shred it to pieces?” Jaxon adds, laughing.

“Or spit on it?” Elise says.

“Gross, Elise. *Jeez* you always take things too far,” Jaxon teases.

I grin at them, because they seem to know exactly what to say.

Konnor cuts in before I can reply. “I think we should stay at my folks’ place tonight. It’s only thirty minutes away. We can go through the envelope

there. What do you think?"

"That isn't fair on everyone else, Konnor," I point out, peering back at Elise and Jax questioningly.

"I'd planned on staying away until tomorrow anyway," Elise says with a shrug. "I love our adventures. We should do more of them."

Konnor grimaces and tilts his head to look at Elise, his brows drawn tightly together. "I don't plan on getting kidnapped again, Elise."

Elise's mouth goes slack. "*Oh God*, yes, sorry, of course." She squirms in her seat, big apologetic eyes glancing around at us. Konnor suddenly bursts out laughing, and I relax into a chuckle.

"Your face!" he states, between his sounds of amusement.

"Jerk, winding me up like that," Elise pouts, punching Konnor in the arm.

Jaxon chuckles. "Don't worry Elise, Konnor isn't that sensitive. Yeah, I'm in, if everyone else is."

"Sorry, Elise," Konnor says, smiling at her. "You're so *preeetty*."

She slumps back as she grumbles, "sycophant," folding her arms across her chest in a pretend sulk.

Konnor turns his gaze back to me. "Duch? You wanna meet my family?"

My chest tightens, and I must be pale because I can almost feel the blood drain from my cheeks. I blink at him and gulp down a strange, dry knot that has formed in my throat.

"Ummm, actually, that makes me a little nervous." I glance down at my feet. "Look at what I'm wearing." I gesture to my black yoga pants and plain wrinkled shirt. "Konnor, I'm not shallow, but you are important to me, and I really want to look nice when I met your family."

*Stupid road-trip wrinkled shirt.*

He cups my cheeks, his smile is ear-to-ear, and his charming dimples are gloriously melting my nerves away. "They will love you! Your standard is everyone else's deluxe."

"That is soooo true, Blesk," Jaxon states very seriously. "Except mine," he laughs, "your standard is my poor."

"Shut up, Jaxon." Elise nudges him with her shoulder playfully.

"She's gonna get a big head. I'm just keeping it real," Jaxon says.

"What do you think?" Konnor asks me, anchoring me with his gaze and ignoring the banter in the backseat.

I sigh loudly. “O...*kay*,” I say, in the little voice I know he loves. He exhales loudly and grins, because he knows I did it intentionally for him.

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The Slater family sure has money. After Konnor enters a code on the keypad, sliding gates at the foot of the driveway open. We are greeted by a water feature that separates the circular drop-zone and is surrounded by gardens that are all finely kept by an evidently talented landscaper. Something about their property and house appears old-worldly as if a part of a noble ancestry.

“Wow, you are kidding, right?” Elise says wondrously, her mouth agape. “You are *rich*! And not like, ‘Yeah, I’m well of.’ Like, *RICH*!”

Konnor chuckles as he continues to navigate around the property. “Lucky, hey?”

“Wait till you try his mum’s Long Island iced teas. They’re epic,” Jaxon says.

“Yeah but you won’t be having more than two of those bad boys,” Konnor laughs, “or I’ll be holding back your hair.”

“You’ve been here before?” I ask Jaxon.

He unbuckles his belt and begins to collect the items from the back seat. “Yeah, a few times. They’re good people, hard not to like.”

“What do your parents do?” Elise inquires, staring out her window.

Konnor glances at her in the mirror. “A lot of stuff, really. They own some shares in some pretty affluent companies. They are partners in a few local businesses.”

The fully rendered house has two storeys, beautifully separated by wrap-around balconies, a skillion roof, and double doors high enough to fit a giant through. Konnor drives the Prado past the house and to the rear, where an electric garage door opens. He pulls in alongside a pink Lexus, a red soft-top BMW convertible, a Rolls Royce, and two Harley Davidson motorbikes.

“Whose Harleys?” Elise asks.

“Guess?” Konnor says.

“Your dad’s?” I say.

“Nope, my sisters’, not even kidding. Flick can pull it off, but Cassidy looks ridiculous. She never really even learned to ride. But she always had to have what Flick had. And, well, no one can say no to Cassidy.” He smiles at the bikes. “I’m kinda surprised my dad hasn’t sold it yet,” he says as his smile grows, spreading across his face.

Suddenly a nervous flutter fills my stomach. If that is the reaction they can inspire in him from a mere thought, what will happen if they don’t like me? I pull my tie from my wrist then gather up my hair and fasten it into a high ponytail. Dropping the visor down, I check my eyes in the mirror, smooth out the top of my hair, and try to rub some colour back into my cheeks.

Konnor grabs my pedantically working hands from my face. “Stop it, Duch, you look like a goddess. Honestly, they are the most no judgemental people in the world.”

“Why do I find that hard to believe?” I murmur, glancing around at the array of brand-new vehicles.

“You’re being silly,” Konnor laughs.

“You are being a Wally!” Elise chimes in.

Konnor gets out of the driver’s seat, walks around the front of the car, and opens my door.

He holds his hand out for me to take, smirking playfully. “Duchess.”

I place my hand in his. “Kind sir.”

Elise bounces from the car, and all four of us exit through the open garage roller door. There is a door in front of the Lexus that seems to enter directly into the house, but Konnor walks us back outside the way we drove in.

“Jax, you and Elise go in and show her around. I wanna take Duch somewhere,” Konnor says.

“Alrighty, hop on, little girl.” Jaxon squats and Elise bounces onto his back without a moment of hesitation.

“Call me little girl again, and I will drop kick you,” she states.

Konnor chuckles and waves them away before yelling out, “See you inside in a few!”

He entwines our fingers together and leads us away from the garage towards an outbuilding about a hundred metres away.

“Cassidy will probably be in her studio,” he says, pointing towards the building in front of us. “Dad had that built for my sisters. They both needed

somewhere for dance practice, *away* from the house.

I peer wide-eyed at him over my shoulder. “He built them a whole studio?”

He nods. “Yeah, but it wasn’t an impulsive decision. Cassidy attends a formal ballet academy. She also teaches dance part-time. So, this is really *her* studio, and it wasn’t a small expense, but she has to contribute some of the money she earns from teaching to general expenses like electricity and stuff. Dad isn’t one to dish out if he doesn’t feel it’s a good investment.”

I grin at him. “So, are *you* a good investment too?”

Konnor splutters out a laugh. “Nope! I’m just an expense. But Cassidy, well, she’ll be performing all over the world one day. She made a promise to stick at it, and she did, but believe me it’s pretty gruelling. Seriously brutal. I complain about university rugby, but the amount of blood, sweat, and tears she puts in every day makes *me* look like the princess.”

“I love the way you talk about her. She’s your little sister, so shouldn’t she be annoying you and embarrassing you in front of all your friends and stealing your stuff?”

He beams at me. “*Oh*, don’t you worry, she has done *all* that. Cheeky little pipsqueak.”

My mouth drops open in response to its grandeur; the exterior is nicer than the house Erik and I grew up in. The studio is a cream brick construction, with a blue skillion roof and tinted windows that are all treated with curtains. With an L-shaped couch in the far-left corner, a six-seater table and chairs, a built-in barbeque and three egg wicker hanging chairs, the porch appears to be the entrance to a nice family home. The music gets louder as we halt at the door, and I recognise the song playing immediately. It’s “Riptide” by Vance Joy.

“This isn’t ballet music,” I say, arching an inquisitive brow at him.

Konnor rolls his eyes. “I’m a bit embarrassed to admit I know this, but she is probably freestyling... like, um, warming up.”

I crack up laughing when my manly rugby-playing boyfriend uses a word like *freestyling*. I just can’t help myself and try to refrain from clutching my stomach as the laughter shoots through my abdomen. “You needed a brother, hey?” I manage.

“God, yeah, I *really* did.”

When Konnor opens the studio door we are overwhelmed by lights and music. Apart from a few doors, mirrors cover every inch of the walls. A

railing runs the full length of two of them. The ceiling has more downlights than necessary and a few strategically positioned spotlights. Cassidy doesn't notice us. Konnor presses his finger to his lips and then points to her as she glides across the room, watching herself in the mirror. She's tiny, sliding and bouncing around with perfect precision and a huge smile plastered across her face. She is genuinely enjoying herself as she twirls around. She makes each movement look purposeful, elegant, and fun. Her strawberry blonde hair, with wisps of red, is in a high ponytail and sways as she moves. She is wearing a pink leotard, tight black shorts that display her lean legs, and thigh-high white stockings. I can't help but smile at her because she looks incredibly beautiful and free-spirited.

Her eyes pop out when she sees our reflections in the mirror, and she comes to a complete stop.

"KONNOR!" Bolting over within seconds, she slams into him. He grunts on impact. He envelops her in his arms and arches his back to lift her off her feet. She squeals, leaning on him and kicking her legs off the ground. He places her back onto the floor and bumps her playfully, and they both share a grin.

He walks her over to me. "This is Blesk."

She waves. "Hi, welcome to the thunder dome." Cassidy turns to Konnor, and yells over the music, "Come dance with your sister." She beams at him and grabs his hand, attempting to pull him further into the room. While she beckons Konnor over, I get a better view of her facial features. I know she is eighteen, but she looks much younger, with delicate freckles on her nose, and cheeks.

He digs his heels in. "Pipsqueak, no."

She scoots backwards into the centre and waves her hands in a silly way, gesturing him over to her. "Come on, come on..."

He gazes over at me, playfully exasperated. "Seee what I have to deal with."

My cheeks ache from smiling at Cassidy while she bounces around and begs Konnor to dance with her. I shrug and grin at him.

"Come on, you're a beautiful dancer!" she yells over to him.

He shakes his head adamantly. "No, Cass."

"You owe me for missing my birthday!" Her words are only faintly audible over the music pulsing from the overhead speakers.



Konnor sighs, tilting his head back in defeat and rolling his eyes. “Thank god Jax isn’t here!”

He walks over to her and takes her into his arms. She straightens her back as they formalise their stance in unison, sticking their noses up to the ceiling in a feigned snooty way and chuckling together. They begin to waltz. She has fluid movements that are weightless and feather-like. She shuffles her feet with ease as Konnor pretends to lead, whipping her body around and exaggerating each step. The young girl in his arms adores him so obviously it makes me want to cry those awesome tears again.

*He did learn to waltz.*

They have done this many times before, that much is clear. He pretends to be embarrassed when he flashes me a quick look, but he isn’t, not even a little bit. As they move across the room effortlessly, I just fall even more in love with him. Because he *is* a beautiful dancer, a beautiful brother, a beautiful boyfriend... and a beautiful person.

*He is just so very beautiful.*

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## TWENTY- ONE: Konnor

As the water runs heavily down my head, soaking my hair and splashing onto the tiles below my feet, I find myself smiling. Downstairs, a short few metres away from where I stand right now, my sister Cassidy, Elise, and the love of my life are laughing and getting to know each other. I truly never thought this moment would come. Jax has already gone to the guest room and passed out after his food coma brought about by a stupid cupcake challenge in which Jax and Cassidy were the only competitors. Though everyone else put their bets on Jax, I wasn't so naive as to discount Cass.

*Jaxon 7: Cassidy 9.*

Where does she put it? I just don't know, but we should have her tested, it's quite freakish.

My past and present really have collided today, and although I forced it on Blesk, I knew she'd be welcomed with open arms. Cassidy loves everyone, sees the good in everyone. My parents are unrivalled in their tactful and tolerant natures. Everyone gets a chance and, more often than not, seconds and thirds. I should know.

Grabbing the soap, I begin to lather myself up and down. It doesn't feel any different being back here, in my room. It feels like nothing has changed.

When Blesk pries herself away from Cassidy's grip and joins me upstairs, the first thing I'm going to do is show her the window I used to jump out of every night, just because I could. Although my room is on the second story, there is a lattice fencing on the outside of my wall that I can easily climb down. I run my hands up my face and through my hair, rubbing the suds through my scalp and then washing them out. My mind drifts to the envelope we've put off opening.

Is there actually closure awaiting us within, or are we being played by a sick, twisted man as a part of his last hurrah? I just don't feel ready to open it. I have no idea what I'm going to see. I'm not sure I'm ready to know.

I love how quickly my Duch and Cassidy bonded, although they couldn't be more different, physically and mentally. Cassidy has had everything handed to her, and even though she is an awesome little soul, she has never had to want for anything. Blesk is taller, curvy, soft, and perfect to roll around in bed with all day long. She has been neglected, abused and deceived, and yet has come out the other end with an incomprehensible purity. Standing naked in the shower is not the best time to be thinking about her curves, her purity, or... her in general. I breathe deeply, and stare down at my cock drumming, slowly gaining in density.

*I wonder how much time I have.*

On a deep exhale, I wrap my hand around my favourite appendage and start to jerk off. What does she look like naked? My shoulder and forehead meet the tiles as I begin to pant through the steam, drawing my hand up and down. What noise does she make when she comes? What would she look like on her knees, sitting below me right now, staring up at me while I pump into her throat?

*Fuck.*

I lean against the tiles harder. I stop tugging on my cock, and enclose my fist so tightly around the crown, zaps of warning shoot through my abdomen. I ignore them, liking the tightness. I groan. "Blesk." I grunt her name between pants. "Blesk." My arse clenches with each thrust. I rock my hips into my palm faster, wrapping my hand tighter. "Blesk... Fuck." My mouth parts. Thinking about her... her breasts. Thinking about her sweet scent. My legs start to buckle, bicep trembles, and a long hiss passes my lips.

Then I hear footsteps in the hallway. *Fuck!*

*Think about something else...*

*My mum. My dad. Grandma walking around the house naked.*

*A heavily obese man covered in jelly.*

*Yep, that did it.*

I turn the water to cold, breathing deeply and focusing on regulating my heart rate. Then as the door clicks open, I freeze. Blesk must have come up. The lapping of the water around my body interrupts the sound of her feet moving across the bedroom floor. My body responds to her proximity, my pulse speeds up again and my cock ignores the cold water. The door to the bathroom opens, and air gets lodged in my throat.

“Konnor, do you mind if I brush my teeth?” I hear her ask so quietly her words are only faintly distinguishable.

*Fuck, no, I don't mind!*

“Yeah, Duch, come in!” I call out.

Moments pass, then seconds, but I don't hear water flushing through the tap, or any other sound, for that matter. I frown and concentrate on her movements until I can't wait any longer and pull the curtain back enough to see her.

*Oh. My. God.*

My heart starts to drum in my cranium like a damn machine gun firing. She is standing completely naked in front of me, staring at me and breathing heavily. I pull back the curtain the whole way and take her all in, and every part of me starts to race, my mind, my pulse. She gulps and forces a nervous smile. Her eyes rake me, and she doesn't try to hide it, hovering on my erection long enough for me to notice her draw a quick breath in before returning her gaze to my face. She moves towards me slowly, apprehensively. *Fuck me...* Her breasts sit heavy and full, her nipples are firm and the perfect shade of pink, her skin is flawless, her stomach soft and flat. My eyes drop, and I'm suddenly on the edge of frenzy.

*Christ, she's magnificent.*

I quickly adjust the water temperature, clearing my throat as I say, “Duch, you—”

She cuts me off as she steps into the shower, “Shhhh, I want to.”

“How much have you had to drink, baby?” I ask guardedly, taking a few small steps backwards so my hands can't grab her and pull her into me. I feel not unlike a crazed animal being backed into a corner.

“A few glasses of wine, Konnor. Stop being such a gentleman. I know you aren't with other girls.”

My eyes scroll her body as the water that is now splashing over my shoulders makes contact with her chest, leaving beads trickling down her skin.

“Well, you aren't like other girls,” I state.

She leans in and kisses me, sliding her tongue into my mouth and humming against my lips. I'm naked and she's in my arms, naked. My arms wrap around her tiny waist and pull her into me, and my skin ignites when I feel hers rubbing slickly against mine. She goes limp against me, allowing

me complete control to manoeuvre her around the shower. My cock is twitching, pressed between our bodies. I want to go slow. I want to savour this, revel in it, but goddamn it if my hands don't want to be everywhere all at once.

*I need more fucking hands.*

I feed my fingers through Blesk's hair, forcing her lips into mine harder.

*I love you.*

My lips trail their way desperately down her chin, down to my favourite part of her neck where her pulse throbs frantically, and all over the delicate skin around her chest.

*I love you.*

My hands trace that perfect curve in her back, caressing her spine from the nape of her neck to her bum.

*I love you.*

I grip her spectacular arse cheek, sinking my fingers into her flesh and grinding her into my pelvis.

*I love you.*

I'm so ready. I'm painfully hard. My erection is jerking around between us, contracting with want. She feels so *fucking* good.

She leans into my ear and purrs, "Is this what you want?"

*God, yes.*

"Only if you want it, Duch," I say against her skin, breathless already, like a damn rookie. I glide my hand forward from her arse to stroke her supple stomach until I am cupping her breast, squeezing it and groaning as I use my palm to stimulate her nipple. My pelvis rocks against her thigh, strumming with the need to sink inside her. Then I lose it, impatiently pushing her against the wall of the shower, grabbing her leg and wrapping it around my back. She gasps. The water from the shower makes our bodies slide together, effortlessly and warm. Rubbing myself against her, I kiss her more deeply, mashing our mouths. My hand feeds through the middle of our bodies, and I position the tip of my erection between her legs.

"Oh God, Duch, thank you, baby. Thank you for wanting me like this," I moan, feeling her wetness rub along the crown of my cock.

Her lips suddenly cease moving, and I hear a small whimper escape them.

A good whimper, I think. I pull away to look into her eyes.

Where did all the air go? My heart stops.

She's... *crying*.

*Fucking crying.*

I frown. "What's going on?"

Her bottom lip trembles, and her eyes look everywhere except where they should—at me.

*I think my heart just broke.*

My hands drop from her, and I take a wary step away. "What's going on, Blesk?" She blinks through the water, beads getting stuck in her lashes and running down her cheeks.

*Silence.*

"Dammit, what's going on?" She stares at the white tiles below her feet, seemingly concentrating on breathing. "Duchess?" I beg again, my voice crackling, panicked.

I don't think I can breathe.

I grab her chin and try to make her look at me, but she purposely deflects my gaze.

"What have I done? Tell me, and I will *never* do it again?"

After several painfully long seconds, she finally stares straight at me through empty, shallow pools. I blink and tilt my head, trying to analyse the void in front of me. All that love she showed me today is lost from her gaze.

She murmurs, in a half-voice I barely recognise, "Don't *ever* thank me again."

"What?"

She strangles a sob. "Isn't this what you want? Isn't this how you treat women?"

"What?" I shake my head, lost in her words.

"How many of these other girls am I not like?" she whispers so damn sadly my insides contort.

"What?" I try to look confused because I am, but I'm also not.

"Last week," she mumbles. "The week before that, how many girls am I not like?"

My stomach sinks. Memories of her broken little voice, right now, at this moment, our most intimate moment to date, will forever haunt me.

"Baby," I say, my tone edging on desperation. "We weren't together."

Her lip stiffens. "That isn't what I asked."

"Don't do this, Duch. Plea—"

“Just answer the question, Konnor!”

“Where are you hearing this from?”

“Tell me it isn’t true. Tell me that the girl I met downstairs was lying to me. Tell me that Cassidy’s friend Faith who just dropped by, was lying to me. That you didn’t sleep with her and her friend Maggie last week—”

I grip the tiles to my side tightly, trying to keep balance while my head spins.

*Fucking Faith and her big mouth.*

Her tears escape now, so hard I can practically taste them, feel them inside me, stinging.

“Tell me that you didn’t sleep with them and then make them to leave the very next morning. Tell me you didn’t treat them like whores. Tell me she’s lying.”

I stare at the water rushing through the drain, because I don’t know what else to do. “It isn’t a lie.”

She winces.

All the weight of every emotion is smashing down on top of me, fracturing little pieces of my heart everywhere. I couldn’t breathe without her last week. I couldn’t think. That wasn’t me, she must know that. That look in her eyes right now, I want it to stop, because it is cutting me up.

“So?” she cries and splutters, barely choking the words out between whimpers. “Answer the question.”

“We weren’t together,” I say again, my eyes deep with regret.

“So if I slept with lots of guys last week, that would be okay with you?”

*No, it would destroy me.*

*Dammit*

My eyes shut as I try to wipe the memory of her face right now from my mind, hoping that when I open them she isn’t still looking at me like that. They stay shut until I hear her moving, then they fly open, and I grab her wrist. I’m desperate. She tugs away from me with a small whimper, steps out of the shower, wraps a towel around her, and leaves me standing there, motionless and completely wrecked. Those girls meant nothing to me, less than nothing. Yet, my sweet-hearted Duchess seems to find that the worst part. I’ve never felt self-loathing like I do right now.

Both my palms meet the tiles on either side of the faucet, and I dip my head between them, focusing on breathing out my frustration. How am I going to fix this? There is no question, I have to. It *has* to be fixable. I turn

the hot water tap all the way to the right. I consider turning the cold off instead just so I can make the pain from my insides match my outsides. I only consider it for a moment. The cold water is definitely more necessary right now. She hasn't left my room, so that's a good sign. I would have heard her leave if she had.

Then it hits me: Faith may still be downstairs. I jump out of the shower and quickly dry myself off, wrapping the towel around my waist. I cautiously enter the bedroom. Blesk is lying in the bed, under the covers, with her back to me. Even though we are fighting, even though she hates me right now, her beautiful body cocooned in my blankets, in my childhood bedroom, is a lovely sight. I am going to fix this. Within seconds I have a pair of grey tracky-pants and a black tee-shirt on and am heading downstairs. They'll be drinking in the games room.

When I enter, Elise, Faith, and Cassidy are all laughing together around the pool table. Faith is leaning over to take a shot to a far pocket. Her tits are pushed up tight in her white camisole and her hair is draping down her cheeks. She's a good-looking chick, ashy blonde hair, pretty petite features, but she doesn't hold a torch to Blesk. Knowing she caused Blesk unnecessary pain makes me wish she were a guy. A scowl contorts my face, my eyes narrow as I focus on her, and my fingers dig into my palms. Cassidy grins at me, but then her face crumbles when she sees my expression.

"What's up with you, big brother?" she asks suspiciously.

I pace towards Faith, who takes quick steps backwards. "What did you say?" I growl.

"Konnor! What are you doing?" Cassidy grabs my arm before I get too close to Faith.

"I didn't say anything!" she yells at me.

Waving Cassidy off I lean towards Faith. "Don't lie to me. Why are you talking shit?"

"I'm not," she says. "I didn't lie about anything."

"What are you two talking about?" Cassidy cries, her voice sounding pained.

I back Faith into a corner. "You knew the score. You knew what it was. I told you I was in love with Blesk. You knew exactly how it was and wanted to hook up anyway."

"I know," she admits.



“So why are you acting like a woman scorned and talking shit to Duch?”

She smirks, her brow lifting. “Duch?”

I shake my head warningly. “Don’t start.”

“Konnor, slow down,” Elise pleads from behind me.

I freeze in my tracks, flashing a quick apologetic look to Elise and Cassidy, and then turning back to Faith.

*Calm down.*

Taking a big breath, I intentionally soften my gaze. “Sorry, I’ve been drinking for the past five hours. I’m sorry if I upset you last week.” I shrug questioningly. “I must have, right? For you to go running your mouth.”

Faith snickers. “Konnor, you’re such an asshole. You act all sweet and innocent but you *use* people.”

“You used me that night just as much as I used you,” I growl, my jaw working uncomfortably beneath my skin.

“Okay, that’s enough!” Cassidy states, stepping between me and Faith. “Faith, you should leave.”

“Cassidy?” she whines, insulted.

“No!” she snaps. “That’s my brother, and he was in a really bad place when we went to visit him. What did you do?”

“*Riiiiight*... so I seduced him. Did Maggie also seduce him?” she hisses, folding her arms defensively across her chest and leaning back on her heels.

“No, I didn’t say that,” Cassidy states adamantly. “I know what my brother is like, I’m not naïve. But if you actually did say something to Blesk tonight then that fucking sucks, Faith! Because we listened to him crying his eyes out about how much he loves her, so whatever happened between you two when I left is not *all* his fault. Don’t make him the bad guy. You knew where his head was at.”

Elise scowls at Faith before saying, “If he were a girl and you were a guy, that would be taking advantage of the situation, you would be in the wrong.”

And I feel like Charlie with my own team of angels.

Faith rolls her eyes. “Whatever, that’s fucking stupid.”

“No, it isn’t,” Cassidy says.

Faith sneers. “What if he forced me, hey? He *was* drunk?”

“Are you fucking serious?” I yell and move towards her more aggressively. “Are you fucking serious right now?”

Elise grabs my shoulders and halts me. I let her.

*I wish Faith were a guy...*

"Let me handle this, Konnor," Cassidy states. "Faith, get out!" She points towards the door. "I know Konnor wouldn't do that, so just get out, because you are upsetting him and that's upsetting me. I barely ever get to see him, so please just go."

"Just gang up on me, then."

"Konnor." I hear Duch's voice come from behind me.

We all turn and peer up at Blesk standing in the doorway, looking uncomfortable. She fidgets with her hands and scoots her feet. She is wrapped in my robe and I can't help but wonder what is underneath.

My pulse starts to thunder. I inhale a big breath and jog over to her, taking her hand in mine and kissing her knuckles. As my lips touch her skin, I peer up at her, pleading with my eyes for forgiveness. For her to be okay, for us to be okay, for everything to go back to the way it was two hours ago.

She forces a smile. "Please just come to bed."

They are the best five words in the world to me right now. "Okay," I say, definitively. "Elise, you know where your room is, right?"

Elise nods. "Yep, Wally do you need me?"

Blesk shakes her head a few times. "No, no. I'm okay. I'll talk to you in the morning."

I place my hand on the small of her back, steering her up the stairway and into my bedroom. When I close the door behind us and lean my back against it, she turns to stare straight at me.

"I'm sorry," she mutters, wiping her sleepy eyes. "I had one too many glasses of wine, and—"

"Stop," I interject. "Don't. Don't apologise to me. You're right. You were right. I acted like an asshole while we were apart."

I move towards her and place my hands on her hips, sinking down into a squat to look her straight in the eyes. "But, baby, I'm monogamous. When you left that day, it destroyed me. I'd lost you once and I just couldn't cope with losing you again. Really, it *broke* me. I acted like an idiot. I treated people like crap. I slept with a few girls, baby, and I did treat them badly. I'm so, so sorry. But I *am* monogamous now, I swear. I'm yours. I was yours before I knew you, Duch."

She starts to cry, and I dart my head to try to maintain eye contact. “There is only you. There was only ever you, and if you ever realise you are too good for me, *which you are*, then there will *still* only ever be you.”

Her robe slides open as my hands gently rub her hips. Now, peeking out from between it is a little silk black nightgown that ends halfway up her thighs, her wavy blonde hair streams down over her breasts, and her bare knees buckle while she shuffles nervously in place.

*Fuck me she’s stunning.*

She swallows hard. “I got jealous.”

My chest aches.

I exhale a long deep breath. “You *never* ever have to be jealous.”

“But I don’t get jealous,” she whispers. “I never have.”

A sad chuckle escapes me. “Yeah, it sucks, hey?”

She blinks at me, seemingly contemplating something. “How many girls?”

Ashamed by my lack of an actual number, I stare at the ground. “A few.”

“Did you . . .” she snuffles and shuffles her feet. “Did you care about any of them?”

“If I say yes, you’ll hate me. If I say no, you’ll hate me.”

She grimaces. “Just say the truth.”

I groan and rub my face roughly with my palms. “No. But you agree, we weren’t together, right? We weren’t together so I didn’t cheat on you, right?”

She gives me a sad little nod. “I know that in your head you weren’t cheating on me. I know that.”

“I would never, *ever* cheat on you. I want one girl, just one. You,” I state.

Her tears begin to fall harder down her cheeks. “She said she made love with you last week. She said the words *made love*. I just couldn’t breathe when she said that.”

I chuckle and shake my head slowly. “Duch, I don’t know if I’ve ever ‘*made love*’.”

“I wasn’t even really mad. I told you it was over so you didn’t owe me anything. But it still hurts so much. I couldn’t imagine a worse feeling. It’s sickening. I’m scared of this feeling. I’m so scared of wanting you this much.” Panic fills her voice. “Or you wanting someone else. I can’t even

imagine you with anyone else. *God, please*, Konnor, if you don't want me, just—"

I grip her tighter and stare her dead in the eye. "Duch, I have only ever loved you. I will only ever love you."

The slightest glimpse of relief flashes through her expression. "Yes... but do you want just me?"

I wipe a tear from her cheek with my thumb. "Even when I was with them, I only thought of you. I only want you."

She sinks into my grip and releases a strained laugh. "I feel like I'm going crazy."

"Hey, join the club," I laugh. "You can be the deputy if you want, but I already got dibs on president."

She offers me a soft smile. "Konnor, I'm soooo crazy." She pauses to make sure I hear the next set of words. "I love you. I am so crazy in love with you."

I hear those words, and the air gets thick. My eyes start to water. My knees no longer can hold me straight, and my heart flips. She loves me. I've waited a long time to hear her say that.

My hands cup her cheeks. "*Christ, Blesk*," I say, barely holding myself together. "I love you. I love you so fucking much!"

I kiss her. I kiss her knowing I love her, and I kiss her knowing she loves me. I slide the robe off her shoulders, and it drops to fall at our feet. As our lips crush together, I walk her backwards towards my bed, shielding her head when she hits the mattress, then crawling on top of her. My arm tucks under her back as I position her on the bed so her hair is fanned across my pillow. Her mouth moves lovingly on mine and her slender fingers gently hold my back as small sighs of contentment escape her. Then I shuffle my hand out from under her, pull my lips reluctantly from hers, and position myself on my elbows, aligning our sight. The feeling of that silky dress under me is driving me out of my mind. I press my hand to her cheek, combing strands of her hair from her face as I gaze at her red lips and heavy-lidded eyes. God, I love her.

*And she loves me.*

Leaning in, I press our foreheads together. "Can I kiss you more?"

She blinks at me, batting her lashes nervously. "You can do anything you want to me."

I think I speak for men everywhere when I say... *Best. Sentence. Ever.*

My lips find hers again, and become needier, more desperate, finding her chin, her jaw, the corner of her mouth, and down her neck. Her pulse beats against my lips as I trace the column of her throat, drumming with the same intensity I feel in my heart.

*She loves me.*

Without thinking or over analysing, I remove my pants with one hand, shuffling them down my ankles and off my feet. My shirt comes off next in one quick motion, and I fling it across the room, hitting a lamp, which prompts a nervous giggle from Blesk. I stare down at her. She's smiling now and it's adorable.

My elbows take my weight as my bare skin comes down on top of her tiny silky torso, and my cock reacts when she parts her thighs for me to move between. I want to be inside her so bad, and *my god*, I think she's going to let me. Her hands brush through my hair, and she giggles while I nuzzle into her neck, applying chaste kisses to every inch of skin I can reach.

*She loves me.*

I lean on one arm as my hand feels for the seam at her thigh, caressing and teasing her skin under my fingertips. She closes her eyes on a deep breath and leans her head back harder into the pillow. A little shiver rushes along her skin as I slide her dress up above her hips, wanting to feel the fabric of her knickers... and I feel nothing but the smooth skin

My groin throbs, turning my hard cock into a steel rod pressed between her legs.

*God, she's going to let me.*

An unwelcoming feeling floods my stomach, filling the pit of it with shame.

I don't want her to *let* me. I want her to *want* me. I stop my hand at her hip, the bare skin below so soft and fucking beautiful I feel on the border of frenzy, but goddamn it, this moment is too important to fuck up. I can't feel like I did last time. If she starts crying again, it will destroy me.

"What's wrong?" she asks, sliding her hands up and down my back.

I sink my teeth into my bottom lip, and although my cock hates me, and every other part of my being curses this decision, I roll onto my back beside her and will my pulse to steady.

"I can't," I state, trying to concentrate on the ceiling and nothing that is throbbing impulsively.

There is a moment of silence, where neither one of us moves, and then she takes a loud breath in and sits up, sliding her leg over my hip so she can straddle me. Her hands are stroking a path down my abdomen, and her pussy is only inches below my erection, naked and bare and hot.

*Christ, help me I won't be able to stop myself again.*

Her nightgown hangs over the slopes of her breasts and her impeccable nipples protrude through the material. My hands slide up her thighs, feeling the heat from her skin and then the ridge of her hip bones beneath the silk. She gazes down at me with heavy eyes, and my cock pulses at the view, her on top of me with that natural blonde hair, those perfect tits... this is my heaven. My back is relaxed on the mattress, my fingers stroke her stomach, up to the curve where her plump breasts meet her fragile ribs, tracing each curve, up and down through the silk of her dress.

"What are you doing, Duch?" I watch her expression sort through so many emotions.

"I want to do this," she whispers, breathing heavily.

"Why?" I ask, because I want to hear her tell me she loves me again.

"I want to make you happy... I don't want you to ever want to be with anyone else. You are so good to me. You've been the best friend a girl could ever have. You've been so patient with me, and I know I'm not easy to be around sometimes."

My heart sinks, and by the look on her face, she sees it.

I sigh. "They are *all* the wrong reasons. I will never, *ever*, want to be with anyone else. But, baby, what are you thinking? You don't owe me anything for being your best friend, or for being patient, or for loving you." I can't hide the disappointment in my voice. "I don't want you to do this because you want to make *me* happy. Your mere existence makes me happy. I want you to do this because it will make *you* happy. I want you to *want* to give yourself to me. I want to love you, Duch, touch you everywhere, so you feel precious, worshipped."

She peers sheepishly down at me with her palms pressed to my chest for support. She wriggles her naked thighs over my hips, and I feel an overwhelming need to bite my bottom lip, suppressing a groan.

"Konnor, I've only been with one person," she mutters.

Fury crosses my face. "*Erik...*"

She nods, looking almost ashamed. My face tightens as anger weighs my heart down, but my hands don't stop tracing her body, in case this is the

last memory I have of it. She could run at any moment. I'm memorising her bends with my fingertips, making a mould in my mind of what perfection should feel and look like. I want to make her feel good. I want her to *want* me. I want to love her completely, with my mind and my *body*. I want to touch her, feel her insides clutching around me. I want to fucking remove any memory of him inside her, and replace it with me, fill her with me. She gasps when I sit up, twisting and quickly folding her underneath me. I part her thighs with my hips and slide up along that silky black nightgown until my lips brush hers. My hand strokes her hair tenderly as I stare straight into her deep brown eyes. "Duch, I want to make *you* feel good. Every part of you is so beautiful. I need you to know just how much I worship you, that your body is not an object to me, it's a *fucking* shrine. This will be about *me* making *you* feel good."

Her eyes flutter under me, and then she pauses for a few long moments. "I've never felt good doing this."

My jaw locks and I need a moment to process everything she is saying, and not saying. All I can think is I want to make her feel good, and that I want her to enjoy this, because right now I understand why she has been so reluctant. She has been used, enjoyed, but never appreciated.

It has never been for her pleasure, only for his.

*Calming breaths... Calming breaths...*

"Baby," I whisper into her ear, "I love you. If you want me to stop, you just say it and I will." Then I crawl down her, my lips ever-so-slightly caress the silk of her dress, nuzzling down her stomach, her navel, the seam of her gown, until my shoulders are between her naked thighs. My eyes stay glued to hers until her head falls back on the pillow. She is panting now, loudly. Her breasts look magnificent from here, and their frantic motion up and down is crazy hot. Then I spot a huge scar that runs down the inside of her left thigh. I wince, squeezing my eyes together. I hate that scar. I hate that I wasn't there to stop her, to pull her from the tub, to hold her when she cried. I breathe through the pain, and finally open my eyes again, leaning in and kissing the scar I hate so much. She whimpers. I kiss it again. And again. And again. And again.

"Never again," I say.

She sighs. "Never."

I thread my arms under her thighs, my fingertips reaching up to leisurely trace the contours of her torso. "Just say stop," I say again. "This

is so *you* feel good, baby, because I worship you. When you're ready, Duchess, put your hands on the back of my head." When my hands grip her hip, and I pull her into my mouth, she moans, and it is my new favourite sound. She is perfect, every part of her, pink and soft and sweet. I lap my tongue up her and latch onto her clit, sucking softly at first, allowing her to relax, give in to the sensation. Her thighs tighten around my head, soft flesh rubbing against the stubble on my jaw. She tastes as perfect as she looks, and my groans are filling the room as loudly as hers are. I rock my hips into the mattress, and apply more pressure to that throbbing little coil, her beautiful skin warm and slick against my mouth.

"Konnor," she moans.

"Blesk," I gasp against her skin, rubbing my erection against the mattress harder. When her fingers grab my hair, I take it upon myself to up the stakes, opening her up with my thumbs and pushing one inside her. She bucks below me slightly, squirming and panting my name. *My* fucking name.

I speak against her hot flesh. "Every part of you is so amazing."

The vibrations of her moans course through me, forcing more pressure to my erection, and I seriously don't know how long I can hold out for. My cock is acting like a damn teenager. Her insides tighten around my thumb as I push in deeper, and I can't wait to feel those smooth muscles kneading around my cock. I suck on her harder. Make love to her with my thumb faster. She writhes, panting and wriggling. She's so close. Her fingers tighten in my hair, walls squeeze me, hips tilt into me. She cries out, whimpering my name and god's. She shudders. Her thighs crush against my cheeks. Silky liquid leaves her and I assault her with my tongue, lapping at her, loving her noises, her taste, her squirming, fucking her with my tongue through her orgasm until she sinks into the mattress.

"Oh god, Konnor," she breathes, raising her arm to cover her forehead.

A grin tugs at my mouth. "Yeah, I know right."

She slaps my arm as I crawl up her body and settle between her legs, pushing her thighs apart wider to allow for me. I peer down at her. Her face is flushed, and the most adorable grin is playing on her lips. "Was that nice, baby? Do I get permission to do that again some time?"

She giggles, her cheeks glistening and pink. "Yep. Permission granted."

I cock a brow at her. "I get a high distinction, then?"

She smirks. "Well, I didn't set the bar very high—"



“Cheeky little thing,” I say, attacking her delicate ribs with my fingers. She giggles and squirms beneath me, her pelvis rolling over my erection, stirring me into a groan. “Fuck, I’m so hard baby. I want you. Do you want me?”

She sucks a quick breath in and slowly nods. “Yes.”

“I’ll go slow, okay?” I swallow hard, crazy nervous to finally be inside her, to finally feel her. “I want you to go on top, Duch. I want you to be in control. I think it’s important.” She darts her eyes away, lowering her head. “Hey,” I tilt her chin up, “don’t be shy.”

“I’ve never...” her brows tighten. “I’ve never done that. I wouldn’t know what to do. Oh god, that is so embarrassing to say.”

“Don’t be silly. I like that I can share firsts with you. Never be embarrassed about that. You go on top. I’ll still do everything, okay?”

She nods.

I reach for my wallet on the bedside table and pull out a condom. I rip the foil open and as I pull the condom over my shaft, I study her face. She swallows hard.

I roll over, pulling her on top of me and grip her dress, yanking it over her head. My heart thrashes against my ribcage. Her naked skin glistens with remnants of her arousal, and her mouth parts as she breaths through her nerves. Without her dress on, I can see her whole extraordinary body open to me. My cock is so hard it aches.

“I want you so bad. You’re so fucking beautiful.”

She leans forwards and presses her lips to mine, sliding her tongue slowly and lovingly inside.

“I love you,” I say against her lips. “So much.” Ending our kiss, looking between our bodies and wrapping my hand around my aching erection, I position myself in between her folds, grip her hips and slowly lower her down on me.

The relief is almost blinding.

Each inch forces a hiss from my mouth, feeling her stretch around me, seeing her shudder and pant, hearing her moan. “Oh god, Blesk, you feel so good. I love you. I love you so much.” I gaze into her eyes. “Are you here with me?”

“Yes,” she breathes. Her lips latch onto mine, and we kiss and pant in rhythm with her rolling hips. “I love you, Konnor,” she gasps, sweat building up between our bodies, her breasts sliding along my chest. I pump

my pelvis up into her, needing to be deeper, needing to move faster. I hold her deep and cup one of her breasts, breaking our kiss to wrap my mouth around her nipple and suck. She trembles around me, and starts to move on her own, slipping up and down my length.

“Oh, fuck, baby, yes, like that,” I growl against her flesh. Groans rumble up my throat, and vibrate against her nipple, hardening it further on my tongue.

“Konnor,” she moans again as her arse slaps against my thighs. That sound... *that fucking sound*. I release her nipple with a pop, and cup her cheeks and thrust my tongue inside her mouth, swallowing all her sounds of pleasure, and groaning while picking up pace. I’m inside Blesk. Her scent is all over me, and mine is all over her. She is finally fucking mine. I want to go slow. But I can’t. How can I? I’m glad she’s on top, or I’d be animalistic by now.

“Tell me it feels good,” I gasp against her mouth. “Please. I need to hear you say it.”

“Feels so good, Konnor,” she moans, forcing her eyes shut.

She tightens around me. Her breathing becomes laboured. Slamming down on me. Harder. Faster. Her hips quake.

“Oh god, Konnor,” she cries out as she climaxes.

“Fuck,” I hiss, sinking my fingers into her hips——so close to coming——and dragging her up and down my cock as she loses momentum to her own orgasm. I am right there, my balls tighten up, abdomen surges with fire, a wave of heat rushes up my thighs, and the pressure is too much, too intense. I grunt, slam her down on me, and cum deep inside her, groaning and growling with each burst, my vision fading momentarily with pleasure. *Fuck. Me.* Stars flicker in my eyes.

“*Christ; that was the most intense orgasm of my life!*” I pant. Collapsing on top of me, she buries her head into my chest, and hugs my torso. I envelop her with my arms and close my eyes, feeling myself drifting off almost immediately, still inside her.

*What a day.*

Exhaustion pulls me into the mattress, embracing me, and coaxing me into slumber. She loves me. I want to be hers. I want more than anything for her to be mine. A small hum leaves my lips as my arms tighten on her lax body, feeling her heart beat against my torso, and I love it. She didn’t stop me this time. She didn’t stop me from loving her the way she should have always been loved.

\*\*\*

The next morning comes out of nowhere, because I barely remember falling asleep. My eyes flicker open, and the smile that eludes my face is ridiculous and wonderful, all at once. With Blesk curled up like a cat on my chest, her feet tangled with mine, and her breath warming my skin, I am the epitome of content. Sex is great. In fact, it is irrefutably one of my all-time favour past times, and I think many people would agree. Sex with Blesk, though... *fuck me*. Epic, extraordinary, phenomenal, mind-blowing, we fit together like a damn glove. I was right, she is perfect to roll around in bed with. Actually, 'perfect' is an insufficient word to describe being inside her, yet I doubt any other would suffice.

Her breathing evens with consciousness and she wriggles beside me. "Morning," I say and press my lips to her forehead. "How did you sleep?"

"*Really, really* good." She hums and wipes her tired eyes, rolling off me slightly to stretch her arms and arch her back. She yawns, before resting her cheek down on my chest, and nuzzling into my neck.

"You must have been so *exhausted*," I say smugly.

"You?" She asks sweetly, ignoring my hubris. She smiles up at me with sleepy brown eyes that seem even more beautiful this morning.

"Oh yeah, it was okay, I suppose," I tease, looking away and feigning nonchalance. "I've had better."

She sticks her tongue out between her teeth, grinning up at me. "Meanie."

I place my hand over hers and feed our fingers together, watching with strange satisfaction as they become one unit.

"What? Me?" I tease. "Surely not. I'm a delight to be around. Or under. Or on top of."

"If you do say so yourself?" She laughs, rubbing her nose along my jaw.

"Oh?" I taunt, looking mockingly confused. "Didn't hear you complaining last night. Heard you screaming, heard you pray to God a lot, and I didn't even know you were religious."

She slaps me playfully on the chest with our combined hands. "You're so up yourself."

"Actually, I was up *you*, sweetheart."

Her mouth drops open. "Konnor..."

I cringe a little. "Sorry, Duch, too far?"

"Yes," she whispers, with her lips curving up unconvincingly.

"Okay, can I take it back?" I say in my cutest voice.

She raises her nose to the air. "Nope," she says through a sweet smile

"Well, can I kiss you then?" I ask, releasing her hand and scooting down slightly so that we are facing each other. I cup her cheek and press my lips to hers, firmly and with passion.

Her lips stretch wider as I kiss her and she mutters, "No," into my mouth.

I part her lips with mine and talk against them, "Just try stop me."

She laughs, swiping her tongue along mine. "Don't talk with your mouth full." She arches her back and presses her pelvis into me.

I pull away from our kiss. "Don't make that sound, and don't do that with your hips or you'll wake him up."

"*Good morning*," she purrs, stroking her fingers down my spine to my backside.

My brows shoot to my hairline. "Wow. You just spoke to my cock. Can you get any hotter right now?"

She giggles and that noise echoes between my thighs, stimulating my standard morning tendencies even further. "That giggle was for him, too, wasn't it? He seems to think so."

Her eyes sparkle as she smiles at me. "Maybe I like him more than you."

"You know what? I'm actually okay with that," I laugh, pressing myself against her a little harder.

We spend hours in bed, lying down, sharing a pillow, kissing, with our legs tangled together, and one arm threaded between our bodies and the mattress. It was a perfect night. I wish I could screenshot it, the feeling of her against me, the smell of her, and that lusty, alluring expression on her face. The inadequate word *perfect*. This second in time is the deluxe version of perfect.

## TWENTY- TWO: Blesk

As soon as Konnor leaves for his morning run, his absence is palpable. Although my skin still tingles from his touch, I can't help but miss him. While I am cuddled up within the warmth of his sheets, and gloriously inundated with his scent, my mind starts to sort through the previous day's events. My love for Konnor has clearly progressed over the past few days into something as uniquely beautiful as it is petrifying. My inability to subdue the sickening feeling that clawed at my stomach last night when I heard about Konnor's array of blonde conquests is unacceptable—I should be able to control those emotions. Even more so, my actions in response to them. Konnor didn't deserve that. But... my mind can't help but scroll through scenarios of him with other girls. Courting them, flirting with them, strategically showing them his dimples. Each one of them would have been beautiful and much more sexually experienced than me. So, if this is what jealousy feels like, I don't like it.

Konnor has always made me feel beautiful, with every word he speaks to me, his pet-name for me, the intensity in his eyes, and yet I have never felt more beautiful than I did last night while he was drawing pleasure from my body. Then even more so when he was doting on me to make me feel the same. The things he did with his tongue smashed down all my barriers, and for the first time in my life I wanted someone... I wanted to be touched.

Previously, sex had been a methodical exchange of services. Erik's love, compassion, understanding, and protection for my body. In contrast, Konnor uses this act as a way to share himself, his vulnerabilities, reveal his soul, his tenderness, his true nature. With Konnor, every part of me ignites under his fingertips, every featherlike caress of his tongue stimulates my pulse, and when he's inside me nothing can cause me torment, my past disappears, and I'm entirely present. In the present with him. It was explosive, and I want to do it again and again. I want him to be mine.

Which is why I can't seem to shake the thought of him being that vulnerable with another girl.

The thought of his lips against Faith's neck, him whispering into her ear how good she feels, makes me sick to my stomach. My mind involuntarily flashes images of them together, her slim body pressed below his strong athletic physique. Did she leave his embrace, his bed, his presence, feeling as elated and precious as I do now? Did he cuddle her after? Did he stroke her hair, and kiss her with the same amount of passion as he did me?

*Get over it, Blesk.*

*He wants you.*

Pulling my phone out from under my pillow, I unlock it and check my messages.

**Elise:** You okay after last night, Wally?

I text back, knowing her phone is permanently connected to her hand.

**Blesk:** Yes, I overreacted. Did you sleep well?

**Elise:** OMG so well, this bed is amazeballs... that Faith chick was baiting you on purpose don't worry about her. You know K only has eyes for u.

**Blesk:** Guess what?

**Elise:** The suspense is killin me.

**Blesk:** Guesssss...

**Elise:** You're really a man.

**Blesk:** Close but no... I had sex with Konnor last night...

**Elise:** How is that close? OMG! Yay! How was it? I want all the details...

**Blesk:** Later... I'll draw you a picture.

**Elise:** Thank god, because you know I'm more of a visual learner.

Konnor comes through the door abruptly, wiping sweat from his brow and wearing nothing besides long shorts that display his muscular legs. As he breathes heavily, his chest pulses with exertion, and his sculptured abdomen trembles with fatigue.

Konnor's face drops when he sees my expression. "What's up, Duch? You have that face on?"

"How come everyone can read my face? What face?" I ask, pulling the covers up to hide everything except my eyes.

He chuckles and sits on the edge of the bed. "The, 'I'm-thinking-too-much-and-not-just-enjoying-the-moment' face." His fingers find the edge

of the covers and he pulls them back below my neck. "Tell Konnor what you're thinking?"

I giggle "You sound like Elise when you talk like that."

"She taught me everything I know," he laughs. "Now spill it."

I giggle playfully. "Nope, don't wanna."

He narrows his eyes, still gripping the edge of the blanket and pulls it down further, slowly, leisurely exposing a little bit more of my bare skin beneath. My pulse gallops in my throat. Yearning fills his hooded eyes as he watches the covers fall below my breasts, the cold air licking at my flesh. He moistens his lips before leaning down and wrapping them around one of my nipples, sucking on it gently and groaning. My shoulders flay open, and my body melts into a hum.

He flicks my nipple with his tongue, slowly at first, and then a little faster, the heat from his breath blanketing me. Unintentional moans escape my mouth as I fist his hair, arching into him, wanting him closer, wanting him everywhere. His hand runs up my stomach and squeezes my other breast.

He purrs as his tongue circles the sensitive flesh, kneading his palm gently on the other. He slowly moves his lips towards my collar bone, applying soft delicate kisses up until his mouth is mashed with mine.

"I love you," he whispers against my lips. "I love your tits." He kisses me again. "I love your skin and the way you smell." He sucks on my lower lip. "The way you taste." And then kisses me deeper, his tongue lashing out to take my mouth.

"I love you, Konnor," I reply between his kisses.

"Christ, Duch." He tears himself away from my lips. "You don't know what hearing that means to me." His forehead presses to mine and his eyes fix tightly shut, the weight of my admission evident in his posture and laboured breaths. This is it. This is how it should feel to be loved by someone. Every day, more and more ghosts attack us, but we execute them as a team, banishing them back to the past where they belong.

*Is there anything we can't overcome now?*

"I love you, Konnor," I say again. "I love you." He whimpers and follows that sound with a hungry and loving kiss. His kiss spirals me into a puddle of longing. Tingles rush down to my toes, and my arms fly around his neck, pulling him closer, sinking into the embrace. That manly scent,

that longing touch, his groans, and the warmth of his body crashing from him in waves sends my system spinning.

He reluctantly pulls his lips from mine and peers down at me. "Now, tell me what you were thinking about when I walked in."

I puff out a big breath, tilting my head at him. "Okay, I was thinking about last night."

"What part, cutie?" he asks while tickling my waist.

"About whether you . . ." I trail off. "Well, it isn't the same for me. You know that being with you, in that way, was beautiful. You're beautiful." A sweet smile plays on his lips. "It felt like we were connected." He cocks a brow at me, smiling suggestively. I roll my eyes at his smutty mind. "And not *just* literally." He snickers cheekily. Contentment makes him mischievous, and it looks fantastic on him. "Konnor, seriously, I want to know whether it's different for you. Is being with me different than when you are with other girls?"

His brows knit as he leans in closer, the sincerity in his eyes undeniable. "Yes. God yes. A hundred times yes, Duch. Nothing has ever felt like that. Nothing has even come close."

"How is it different?" I ask timidly.

He exhales and darts his eyes around as he contemplates his answer. I shouldn't have asked. It was a silly thing to ask. He finally rests his line of sight back on me.

"Every time I was with a girl, there was always something missing. There was a hole, and it was empty. No matter how much I tried to fill it, it only grew. As if the more I tried to fill it, the clearer the inadequacies of what I was trying to fill it with became." He clears his throat.

"What I'm trying to say is, every girl I've been inside, every girl I've touched, has only made not having you in my life more obvious. Yesterday was the first time I've ever wanted to whisper 'you're mine' in a girl's ear. That was the first time I've ever wanted to whisper, 'I'm yours' and 'we belong to each other.' That's the first time I've ever made love, Duchess. Being with you feels like every part of me is full, finally. Nothing else feels that good, nothing ever will."

*I love that answer...*

*I love Konnor.*

*And I am his.*

*And he's mine.*



\*\*\*

Sitting with Konnor on the porch eating his signature waffles with cheese concoction, which, despite my reluctance are actually delicious, gives me blissful insight into what a forever with him could look like. After playful bed talk, making love to each other, and eating breakfast outside, I could most definitely get used to mornings like this one.

Elise and Jax really are utilising the property, having woken up hours before Konnor and I finally managed to pull ourselves away from bed, and are currently engaged in their second game of tennis. By the look on Konnor's face, this is a normal Sunday at the Slater residence.

Konnor's father, Ben, arrived home earlier this morning and embarrassingly caught me in the hallway before I managed to shower and dress appropriately. However, he was charming, polite, and purposefully oblivious to my gown and bed-hair. His demeanour is reflected in his children, with both Cassidy and Konnor being exceptionally courteous people. I am not used to this kind of life. Manners. Peace. A gentle life.

The sun is shining through the trees, flickering us with beams as we sit around the table and enjoy the warmth they bring with each invasion. The envelope sits beside me on the glass table-top, but Konnor seems to be in his own head, as he so often is.

He is facing the landscaped garden that descends the deck in front of us, with his ankle rested on his knee and his arms relaxed up on the shoulders of the chair. He's wearing a V-neck green tee-shirt that enhances his emerald eyes, a pair of black loose-fitting track-pants, and his hair is messy in the most scrumptious way. He looks sexy, comfortable, and at home. The property is lush with greenery, and from this elevated wooden platform, it appears there must be an elaborate team of caretakers to maintain it. As I watch Konnor, sitting calmly in his element, he appears to be the master of his destiny. He is powerful for the first time. There are no shackles on this boy, there are no restraints, and his expression displays nothing less than serenity. A noise startles him, and his eyes dart towards the French doors behind us.

He lowers his arms and twists around. "Dad." Konnor bounds up and envelops the man he calls father into his embrace. Both patting each other's backs with glowing smiles.

"Son, I bumped into your lovely friend here in hall earlier. Are you going to officially introduce me?" Ben asks.

Konnor releases him and turns to me. "This is Blesk. She's -" He pauses and then smiles. "My girl."

"Blesk, it my pleasure." Ben says, and then turns back to his son. "Now, what are you doing here? Not that I'm not pleased to see you."

Everything about Ben is genuine, like his affection towards his family and his old-school manners. They release each other before Ben pulls out a chair and shuffles in beside us.

Despite Ben's strong figure and youthful physique, the kind wrinkles that form around his eyes divulge his true age. He has salt-and-pepper hair, is freshly shaven and has the same hazel-coloured eyes as Cassidy.

He picks up Konnor's fork and begins to tuck into the waffles on his son's plate. "I've missed your cheese waffles."

Konnor laughs. "They're killer, hey?"

Shovelling in a mouth full of the maple and salty cheese creation, Ben looks at me. "What did you think of them?"

I chuckle and cross my legs under the table. "Well, they are actually really nice, but it still seems weird."

"Yeah, well," Konnor pauses and looks at me, "an old friend of mine used to put sweetcorn in with mac-and-cheese, so there is just something about the sweet and salty infusion of flavours that I really like. It reminds me of her."

My mouth drops open, and my hand flies to my lips, smothering a small gasp.

*He remembers.*

"I didn't know that," Ben says. "I always thought it was just a happy mistake and that you were trying to sabotage breakfast."

Konnor's eyes twinkle and he scoffs. "Come on, that doesn't sound like something I would do." Ben takes a sip of his son's orange juice. "Don't lie to the poor girl. Konnor was always trying to prank us growing up."

"Was he really?" I say intrigued, arching a questioning brow at Konnor. He smiles. It is strange hearing about his life from someone I don't know, as I was the only one in it for so long. I am new to his family, to this life. And yet not new at all.

Ben nods, bumping Konnor with his elbow. "Yep. He went around dying everything green for a week—"

“Oh, she doesn’t need to hear this,” Konnor interjects.  
“Hush, son, your old man is telling a story. I woke up one morning with green hair and my work shirt was green,” he laughs. “Even the damn tap water was green.”

Konnor leans back in his seat, looking almost impressed. “I got me some mad skills.”

I giggle. “How old were you?”

“Twelve,” Ben says.

I missed so much. Never again. “How did you make the tap water green?” I ask.

Konnor looks delightfully smug. “Well, Duchess, I’m so glad you asked. I put green jelly crystals in the faucet under the washer.”

“I remember that!” a voice says from behind us. Cassidy appears and sits on her dad’s knee. “What up, Daddy?” she says, kissing him on the cheek. Ben noticeably brightens with Cassidy in his arms and he gives her an affectionate little squeeze.

“You’re too old to sit on Dad’s lap, Cassidy,” Konnor states, pinching her trim little stomach teasingly.

She sticks her tongue out, crinkles her nose, and feigns a bratty tone. “Daaaaad, Konnor’s hitting me.”

Ben grimaces at Konnor. “Now, now, Konnor, let me keep my little girl for a while longer. God knows I lost Flicker as soon she came out of the womb.”

Konnor sighs and shakes his head at his little sister. “Such a bloody princess.” He turns to face Ben. “Where is Flick? Cassidy just said she was away for the weekend.”

“Isn’t she with her new lady love?” Ben asks Cassidy.

Cassidy steals a piece of waffle and talks with her mouth full. “Yeah, but I don’t know where. Probably in Connolly somewhere.”

Konnor shrugs at Cassidy, narrowing his eyes. “Who? Why Connolly? Who’s she seeing?”

Cassidy chews the food in her mouth and then swallows, looking apprehensive. “You don’t wanna know.”

Konnor glares at her. “Who, Cassidy?”

“Stacey Grange.”

*Ohhh, that’s why he won’t approve.*

“I know Stacey,” I say, trying not to appear completely idle. “She was friends with Erik for a while. She went to Connolly High.”

Konnor’s expression hardens, looking anything but impressed. “Great. So she’s been hanging out with that crowd.”

Ben chuckles at his son’s reaction. “Don’t worry, Konnor, the boys know to behave here. They’ve grown up a lot since you left to study.”

“Are you talking about the Butcher boys?” I ask, although I know the answer. Stacey Grange is a family friend of the Butchers. And it’s a well-known fact that Stacey is off-limits romantically, apparently until now.

Cassidy peers at me questioningly. “You know them?”

Yes.

“Not really.” I wave indifferently. “But doesn’t everyone in The District know *of* the Butcher boys?” I offer Konnor an apologetic smile, because I know his adverse inclinations towards Max Butcher after the rugby party a few weeks ago.

Konnor scoffs. “Yeah, alright. I’ll have a chat with Flick when I see her next, but you stay clear of them, please, Cassidy. They are just bad news.”

“Yes, *big brother*.” Cassidy rolls her eyes dismissively, before standing and wandering back inside the house.

“Glad you’re back, son, so you can do some of the fatherly duties for me,” Ben chuckles, looking proud. “It makes my life easier when you’re around to watch the girls.”

“I hate those guys,” Konnor grumbles, folding his arms across his chest. He looks adorable when he pouts. I want to sit on his lap and smooth the lines forming between his brows. His protective nature appears to bleed out into all aspects of his life. He will make a wonderful father.

*Slow down, Blesk.*

My phone vibrates with an incoming call. Konnor’s eyebrows furrow and he stares questioningly at me, before mouthing “Who is it?” The word *Dad* flashes at me from the display, and a strange flutter shifts through my abdomen. I stand and nod politely at Ben and Konnor before walking around the corner of the house and out of earshot.

Placing the handset to my cheek, I answer. “Dad.” I lean on a pillar and hug my stomach with my free arm, staring out at Cassidy’s studio.

“Kitten, how are you?” His voice echoes through the speaker.

“Why is it so echo-y?” I ask, plugging my other ear and focusing on the sounds coming through the line.

“I’m at the hospital,” he says. Then I hear the beeps and hums in the background.

My pulse drums in my veins.

“Erik is awake, kitten. He’s been asking for you. You’re the only person he wants to see,” he continues.

I am paralysed by an array of emotions, something akin to relief laced with fear. My mouth won’t respond to my mind’s instructions.

*Say something.*

No words are forming.

“Did you hear me? I said Erik’s awake,” my dad repeats.

I gulp as silently as I can. “Is he okay?” My voice comes out almost strangled.

A huge relieved breath gushes through the phone. “Yes, Kitten, he is. though his short-term memory is vague, the doctor said it’ll probably return. But at this stage he doesn’t remember much about the day of the assault.”

*Convenient/*

“Does he look tall?” I ask, because it’s the first thing that comes to my mind.

“What do you mean?” he asks, sounding concerned. “Kitten, where are you? I’ll come get you.”

My eyes start to well up, and my lungs contract in my chest, making my breathing strained, and my head dizzy.

I jump and clutch my heart when someone touches my waist, feeling strangely on edge. When I fly around wide-eyed, Konnor has his hands held up in clear view, and his face is riveted with shock.

“Whoa, Duch,” he grimaces, “what the fuck’s going on?” I tighten my face and try to stop the tears that are pooling in my eyes from escaping.

He ducks his head to stare me straight in the eyes. “What’s going on?”

My dad’s voice comes through the phone that is now at my side. “Kitten?” Kitten? “Blesk?” Konnor looks down at the phone and then back to my face, drawing his brows together. Disapprovingly, he grabs it and although I gasp when he snatches it from me, I don’t try to stop him. He ends the call then holds down the lock key until the display blackens.

Konnor pulls me into his arms, kisses my temple, and rests his cheek on my forehead. “Who was that?”

I embrace his waist, scrunching his shirt behind his back and nuzzling into his chest. His gorgeous scent makes my body melt into him on an

exhale.

"That . . . was my . . . dad," I stammer. "Erik's awake."

I'm not sure why I'm tearing up, I'm not sure why my hands are shaking, and I'm not sure why I'm equally happy and sad. "Please don't be mad at me, Konnor, please don't, but I want my brother back. I feel like I've lost him. He might as well have died because I can't see him. I can't talk to him. I feel like I'm in mourning." I peer up at his face, and my chest tightens when I see how wrecked this conversation is making him. He stares straight ahead, his eyes are narrowed, and his jaw muscles dance beneath his skin.

"Konnor, you're my best friend, and I just need to try and organise all these feelings. Baby, I'm so sorry if this hurts you." His scowl remains unwavering, trained on something in the distance. He combs my hair and keeps me tightly pressed against him, very tightly. With his heart beating ferociously against my ear, I can barely hear anything else. "Baby?"

His eyes drop down to acknowledge me, but his head stays rigidly stationary. "Duch?"

"Don't be mad," I plead.

*Don't cry, Blesk.*

He shakes his head just once, and scoffs slightly. "I'm not mad. I can't shake this feeling, Duch, that's all. Just ignore me, say what you need to say, and we'll work through it." His tone is chillingly apathetic.

*He's lying. He's mad.*

I rest my cheek back against his chest, partly because I don't want to see his wounded face a second longer, and partly because I want to inhale him, knowing it will help soothe the knot I feel in my stomach.

"What do I do?" I ask, defeated. "What do you want me to do?"

He takes a violent breath in and then slowly exhales. "I want you to be happy."

"Konnor, what do you want me to do?"

He flinches. "I hate him. The thought of him makes me feel crazy."

"I know, I know. So what should I do?"

"What does he want?" His voice sounds clipped, hoarse, and cold.

"My dad says he doesn't remember much," I admit. "But his memories may come back."

"So what, you just forgive him and pretend it never happened? Is that what you're thinking? Please tell me that's *not* what you're fucking

thinking.”

I shudder at his tone. “It isn’t that black and white, Konnor. How do I explain to my dad why I don’t want to see his son? His only living blood relative?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he hisses, sarcasm lacing his words. “Maybe, just maybe, tell him he’s a *FUCKING RAPIST!*”

My breath catches in my throat, and I nearly choke when I hear his words. He drops his arms to his side and pumps his fists so hard his shoulders quake. Refusing to let go of his waist despite his rigid stance, I squeeze him tighter and stroke his back soothingly. His body is frighteningly taut, and his muscles ripple under my fingers as I attempt to calm him.

“Should I?” I ask. “Is that what I should do? Honestly?”

He grabs my shoulders and pushes me away so he can search my expression. “I’m sorry, Duch. But look at me, I’m seething. But I love you. *Sooo fucking* much. If you want me to...” his eyes turn to slits as his voice falters “-Christ, I don’t even know what you want.” He releases my shoulders and feeds his fingers through his hair, scuffing it back and forth aggressively. “What do you want?” He groans. “What do you want from me here?”

*I don’t know.*

“I think I need to see him,” I whisper, hating the words and the feelings they are evoking. “And then I’ll know when I look in his eyes. I’ll know.”

His cheek muscles contract as he grinds his teeth together, and he stares at me like I’m completely crazy. “A few seconds ago when I touched you, you jumped, you were scared,” he shakes his head, “and that isn’t a normal reaction when your boyfriend touches you, Duch, *especially* when he spent a good half of last night *inside you*.” He yells the last two words. He shakes his head again, becoming more uneasy as he speaks. “You shouldn’t see him. You shouldn’t be in the same room with him.” I hardly notice Elise and Jaxon as they jog, bright-eyed, up the steps towards us, slowing when they hear our conversation. I glance at Elise just as her expression crumples.

I turn back to Konnor as a sob escapes me. “Come with me?”

His face distorts like I just slapped him. “Are you fucking *crazy*? I would strangle him with his own IV line, Duch.” He grimaces and waves his hand towards Elise. “Take Elise. Fuck, I gotta go for a walk. This is

such bullshit.” My mouth drops open and before I can reply, he’s sauntering across the property.

“Konnor!” I yell out to him, desperation clutching at my voice.

“Konnor!” Elise echoes.

Jaxon jogs after him, shouting, “Slater, slow down!”

Elise walks slowly over to me and leans against the wall at my side, watching me as I grip the pillar and squeeze it tightly. He hates me, and his pain is so much harder to bear than my own. I can’t make everyone happy. I can’t make anyone happy. I can’t make my dad happy. My brother. The love of my life. I am at a loss. For the briefest of moments we had a glimpse at a peaceful life together, but 'life' keeps throwing obstacles at us.

“Wally, I’m going to take a leap here and say that was about Erik.” Elise whispers.

“What gave it away?” blubber, trying to suppress all the boiling emotions. Sniffing, I wipe my eyes and look out over the perfect garden to avoid looking directly at her.

Elise moves to stand in front of me. “The, and I quote, ‘I will strangle him with his own IV,’ bit. That part *really* gave it away.”

I release the pole and look straight at her. “I’m sorry. I know what I said last time we spoke, but Erik is awake, and I just got all messed up. I have to see him. I need to look him in the eyes and see if he is still Erik.”

She nods, dubious. “Okay, let’s do it then.”

“Really?” I say with desperate hopefulness. I don’t want to go alone.

“Yes, of course,” she sighs. “If it's what you want to do, then I am here to support you.”



## TWENTY-THREE: Konnor

She hums sweetly, rolling her shoulder to her cheek, grinning, and squirming under my sheets. Her face is soft, *pleasured* even, as her body arches and feminine sounds of bliss escape her mouth. As I move towards her and sit to the side of my bed, I can tell she's dreaming, and I hope it's about me.

*Fuck, yes.*

My breathing quickens with hers, and I shuffle my weight on the bed.

*Christ.*

My hand goes to her cheek, and she moves into it, applying tender pressure to my palm. I lick my lips, in preparation to kiss her. She smiles. "Mmmm," she moans, "Erik."

My eyes fly open and I sit up.

It destroys me that whenever I close my eyes, I see him. His body grinding against hers, her dress hiked her up around her waist, underwear tangled at her ankles. Smudges of mascara line her teary eyes and she remnants of paint in her hair. His greedy claws grasp her thigh as he presses himself into her. What I don't see me.

When I close my eyes, I don't see me under her, stroking her skin that smells so fucking good, rubbing her cheeks and staring into her eyes to make sure she is *right there* with me, her clenching around me as I move in and out of her, and the way her lips look when she says "I love you." I don't see that.

When you give someone everything, when you offer them everything you are, heart, body, mind, soul, sometimes you end up an empty shell, like there is nothing left of you because that other person fucking took it all. I'm excessively intoxicated, but besides the liquor burning my throat and the drumming in my cranium, I don't feel much.

I almost killed a person. I tried to kill my friend, as much of a friend as he could be with what little we have in common.

I stare up at Jax from the grassy patch I've been sitting on for a while. "So, could I have done something different?" As I speak with my hands, the liquor in my glass sloshes around. The bourbon splashes onto my shirt. "Oh, crap," I complain, wiping it with my hand.

"Yeah, mate, that isn't going to work, that stain can just join the others," Jax says, exasperated.

"Could I? Because she *loves* him, and I could go to jail for what I did, so I just don't know anymore," I say, then laugh hysterically. Because it is so funny. Seriously. What a riot. I lie back on the grass, the condensation seeping through my shirt, making me feel not unlike I'm in a pool. I think I like it.

Jax is sitting on a fold-out chair to my side, nursing his glass and frowning at the horizon.

"So, there you go, Jax," I slur. "Erik's been keepin' this secret from us. You jus rape a girl for a *goo* four years, and then she'll eventually fall in love with you."

"Shut up, man," he groans, not making eye contact with me.

"Fuck you!" I growl.

"Slater, you're my bud. Okay? You're one of the best. Maybe, just maybe, you deserve better than this."

I sit up abruptly. "Seriously? Fuck off. She's my girl. I could never deserve better than her."

"I don't mean you deserve better than her," he exhales loudly, "just better than this. Look, I love B, but you guys need to, like, mellow or something. Man, girls claw each other's eyes out to be with you, and you just so happen to also be a really decent bloke. A much better bloke than Erik. All I'm saying, and doing a crap job of it, is look after yourself, too."

"I love her," I say, very matter-of-factly.

"Yeah, I know you do. And she loves you," he states emphatically.

I scoff and splutter my drink out. "*Right.*"

*Does she love him?*

He has been her everything, lived in her house, held her while watching scary movies, he's been in her bed, been inside her. I groan as these thoughts pass through my mind, and with them more unwelcome images. When the police told me Liz was in heaven, I believed them despite the concept of the word *heaven* being foreign. I didn't even try to find her. I saw her, over and over again, in every face, in every reflection, in every

blonde-haired, brown-eyed girl, but I never actively sought her out. When the police declare someone's death, then they are dead. If only I'd followed my gut. If only I'd searched for her. Then maybe I could have been what she needed. Maybe I could have stopped her from slicing her thigh open, I could have stopped him from touching her. I could have loved her every day of her life preceding this one and every day hereafter. I wince and hug my stomach. "Do you think she loves him?"

Jax exhales loud enough for me to hear. "I don't know."

\*\*\*

In the last five hours I've managed to drink my weight in alcohol, despite Jax's best efforts to moderate me, and I've passed out twice. When I hear the friction of the Prado's tyres on the pavement, and that familiar low howling that accompanies the outer gate closing, I immediately regret my current physical and mental state. Blesk is in that car. She's been to see Erik. I feel sick.

Thankfully my father and Cassidy have more productive things to do at 2:00 on a Sunday than witness my impending emotional breakdown.

The car pulls up and parks in the drop off circle, as I pretend to swing casually on the wicker chair at the house's entrance. My expression is firm, molars grinding together within my caged jaw. Between my heaving chest, my fisting hands, and my neck that is begging me to crack it, I can't possibly concentrate on suppressing my aggravated expression.

*Fuck, look at her dress...*

I want to snap out of this. I want to, because she is getting out of the car, wearing that sundress, with those legs exposed and that golden hair over each shoulder, but of course, I had to use my personal choice of crutch, and now I'm fucking wasted. I want her to see me smiling and charming.

*I hate Erik.*

Elise jumps out and meets Blesk by the passenger door, cuddling her, whispering in her ear, and then walking with her hand-in-hand towards me.

So, I'm the fucking enemy? Blesk needs an escort to approach me because I can't be trusted, or my reaction could be unpredictable. I stand, make the briefest of eye contact with Blesk and strut through the doors. My feet take me away from her, as fast as possible, not because I'm mad at her,

but because I actually *can't* trust myself. I *am* unpredictable right now. Damn Elise for knowing that. I want more than anything to hold her, to smell her. I freeze.

*Go to sleep, Konnor.*

*You're fucking dirt-drunk.*

I stand like a statue still in the hallway and listen for the front door to click closed and their feet to shuffle towards me. I spin around and look at her, and her big, brown Bambi eyes blink hesitantly at me. I want to hold her in my arms, feel our hearts beat together, and kiss and lick and taste her to remind her who I am. Elise releases her hand and walks up the staircase quietly. Blesk bows her head, closing her eyes just as she walks straight into me. My arms sweep open seconds before I realise, she's moving into my embrace. Then she's gripping me so tightly, fisting my shirt behind my back and panting into my chest, expelling every ounce of emotional strength she holds. Blesk begins to sob as I wrap my arms around her shoulders and head, enclosing her within me.

"Konnor," she snuffles. When I hear that sweet voice, my arms tighten around her, twitching with the need to protect her, and clutching with the need to keep her. I lower my head, nuzzling into her golden hair and breathing her perfect scent in.

*Fuck, I'm an idiot.*

"God," I find her upper arms and clasp them with my fingers, before pushing her away so I can study her face. My shoulders drop when I see it, when I see her sad little face.

"Baby, fuck," I shake my head, not wanting to ask the question, and anticipating my revulsion towards the answer. I work up the courage to say it. "What happened?" She leans back into me, and I can feel her nails on my back through the fabric of my shirt, her breath spouting hot on my chest.

Sniffling and tilting her head just enough to talk, she murmurs, "I love you, Konnor. I hope you know that."

Something in me breaks, and I feel my insides twist. "What happened?" I repeat, monotone.

*She isn't saying goodbye, Konnor.*

*She isn't.*

Her eyes drop. "Let's sit down."

*Fuck.*

*I won't survive losing her.*

*Again...*

*What is this?*

*He's convinced her to tell the cops.*

*She's leaving me for him.*

Defeat and self-loathing crawl into my veins, wheeling and dealing irrationality.

She takes my hand in hers and drags me along behind her as she enters the living room and sits down on the couch. She motions for me to sit, and then crosses those impeccable thighs over each other, entwining her fingers around her knee. Desperation sits heavily in my bones, weighing me down.

She leans forward and watches me half-stumble to take a seat on the couch opposite her.

She blinks at me. "How much have you had to drink?"

I scoff, rubbing my forehead and temple with my fingers therapeutically. "Not enough for this talk, Duch." A strained chuckle escapes me.

I slump back into the cushions and fold my arms over my chest defensively, defending my soon-to-be broken heart.

She flutters her lashes at me. "You look mad."

I scoff. "Mmm, not mad."

Her eyebrows raise practically to her hairline. "Okay, that was convincing."

"Sorry," I say, sarcastically.

*Stop it, Konnor. Drunk dickhead.*

"Do you really want to know what happened?" she asks, brushing a strand of hair away from her cheek and tucking it behind her ear. Her eyes are so full of sadness.

"Yup, shoot," I state, feigning nonchalance.

She reluctantly begins to talk. "Let me finish everything before you react, okay?" She takes a deep breath. "When I got to the hospital with Elise, we got some coffee from the vending machine and had a chat because I was nervous. I don't want you to think this was easy for me, because it wasn't. It was horrible, and I felt sick the whole time. As I approached his room and heard his voice, everything in me froze then recoiled. I wanted to turn and run away. I didn't want to be there. I heard the same two sentences over and over again in my head: 'I'm the only person who has been inside you, right?' I need to make you feel this again.'"

My molars slam together. “Stop.” I fly up and thrust my hands through my hair, before kicking my dad’s ottoman. “Did he fucking say that shit to you?”

“Sorry, Konnor. I’m just trying to tell you how I felt,” she says, peering up at me as I pace the living room.

I grimace. “Can you save me those kinda fuckin’ deets, Duch?”

“Yes, sorry, sorry.” She shakes her head as if she should have known not to say that.

The thought of him saying that to her coils hatred around my very existence.

I slump back down on the chair and pant heavily. “Continue.”

“I went into the room, and when he saw me, I could tell immediately that he remembered everything he did. He sat up straight away and the look in his eyes killed me. He knows, Konnor. The shame and guilt were so obvious. I gulped and so did he. Then I moved in to sit beside him, shuffling awkwardly, and avoiding his eyes. He reached out and touched my hand. My heart jumped into my throat, and when I retracted my hand, he winced. We must have sat in silence for at least twenty minutes.”

“Where was Elise?” I ask, rigidly.

“Watching from the doorway. We sat without talking for ages. He could barely open his mouth after having it wired shut for the past three weeks. Then he spoke, and his voice was gravelly and strained. He said, ‘Is there anything I can say that will bring you back to me?’ I shook my head. He said, ‘Are you with *him* now?’ I sighed, and it felt really good to answer. I said, ‘Yes.’ When I said yes. . . I was smiling. He said, ‘I promise I’ll do anything to earn back your trust, anything. Just name it.’ I started to cry and said, ‘Promise?’ He said, definitively, ‘Yes, anything. I promise, Bebe.’ So, I said, ‘Don’t call me, don’t try to see me, and if you do see me, walk the other way.’ Then I left.”

My heart throbs in my chest, contracting with relief. “So, you’re not leaving me, then?” I keep my eyes anchored on the unmoving ground, because focusing on her features is too difficult.

I need to lie down.

She moves in beside me and puts her hand on my knee. “Did you really think that was a possibility?”

I gulp and turn my attention to her, dazed and sheepish. “After the way I acted? Yes, Duch, I did.”

She kisses my cheek. "Leaving you will never be a possibility."

\*\*\*

Blesk sits with her back flush against my headboard and her legs wide apart, as I lay curled in a drunken foetal position between her thighs on the mattress, half-conscious. I am spooning her leg. I can smell the peach-scented cream she uses and it calms me. Her loving caresses satiate my senses, as her fingers gently brush my brown hair from my face. I'm awake, my eyes are shut, but my mind is taking in this moment's perfection. The deluxe version of perfect. From the radiating in my temple and the swelling in my hands and feet, it's apparent I've been passed out on her lap for a few hours.

I'm going to feel like shit for the rest of the day... and most of tomorrow.

*Why does she put up with this?*

*Why does she put up with me?*

She's wearing a dress. A tiny white sundress, and it's driving me crazy. Her fingers continue to comb my hair and cheeks, tickling my neck and shoulders, while she's wearing *that* dress. Her thigh makes for a supreme pillow, and she definitely smells better. My hands tighten around her knee, running up her thigh until one feeds under her backside and the other ends in between her legs. A small surprised gasp escapes her. I bite my lip, groaning when I feel the heat between her legs. My thumb rubs her through her knickers, circling and kneading. She hums. I stare up at her and watch as my fingers make her come completely undone. She has her eyes closed, breathing deeply and arching into my palm.

I turn, grab her thighs and drag her down the bed until her head hits the mattress. A gorgeous little whimper breaks her lips and her eyes widen with excitement.

*Make that sound again.*

I lie down between her legs, using my hips to encourage her thighs further apart. My breathing is laboured, strained and fast. I want to be inside her, now. My hand caresses her neck, up her cheek and into her hair. My other hand moves down to unbutton my jeans and release some pressure

caused by my swelling erection. I shuffle my pants down and kick them off the bed. She peers up with those big brown unwavering eyes, wanting me to take her. I can tell.

*Be gentle with her.*

“Blesk,” I almost plead.

Her fingers stroke the contours of my back muscles. “Konnor, make love to me.”

I groan, my cock pulsing, beating against my stomach and heavy under its own weight.

Breath hurdles out of me. “Ask me again.”

She smiles. “Make love to me,” she purrs.

*Best. Sentence. Ever.*

I wiggle my brows at her, and grind against her, moaning deep in my chest when I feel her thighs tighten around my hips. “Ask him,” I tease, peering down between our bodies.

She giggles and looks down at my cock. “Make love to me,” she says playfully.

I touch the delicate decorations on her dress. “He wants to know if we can keep this pretty thing on.”

She smiles. “Yes.”

I almost grunt with primal need as I kneel to yank her underwear off fast. She responds immediately and arches, helping me pull them from her ankles with ease. Then I come down on top of her and prop myself up on my forearms, nuzzling into her neck and claiming that soft skin with my mouth. She moans as I feed one hand down to grip her spectacular arse, and slowly push inside her.

\*\*\*

After working off my alcohol on top of Blesk, taking a long hot shower, and downing two Panadol, I actually feel half-human again.

“We need to look in that envelope, Konnor,” she states as I walk out of the bathroom.

“Or we could just have sex again?” I suggest, nodding.

She talks through an adorable grin. “At some point we have to drive back to campus.”



“Or we could just take the year off and stay in bed.”

“Seriously, Konnor.”

“I am being serious,” I say, walking over to her and grabbing her perfect arse cheeks, kneading her slightly into my groin. “Do I feel like I’m joking?”

She rests her forearms on my shoulder and peers up at me, tickling my neck with her long fingernails. I grin down at her. I love the way her nails feel running through my hair, goose bumps lacing every inch of my skin. I shiver and keep rubbing her back, kneading her bum into my groin and feeling her shapely figure beneath my fingers.

*My God she does things to me.*

It never occurred to me that touching someone else, all over their body, tracing every curve and arch, as much as I want, is actually a weird concept. This body is not mine. It’s hers. She allows me the pleasure of putting my hands on her most prized possession, her most personal aspect of living. When I kiss her neck, I can feel her heart beat vibrating through her artery, I can taste her skin and sweat when I lick her, and she allows me this honour. I will never take it for granted, and I will never stop touching her. For as long as she lets me, my hands will be on her.

She arches her neck up and raises her brows at me, her expression displaying a level of severity I don’t often see on her.

I roll my eyes. “Okay, Duch, let’s open the envelope.”

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I actively ignore the documents she is perusing and analysing. Bank statements. Photos. News articles from when I was taken. A deed to Knight Estate. A collection of paper-based trophies that asshole kept. I have no interest in them.

*Or do?* This is probably my innate self-preservation technique brought about by this potentially life-changing situation. All I’m focusing on is her mouth and the way she licks her finger before she turns each page. Part of me is praying there is a lack of revealing information in amongst that pile. I’m happy. There is nothing in there that could improve my life. I have everything I need, right here -licking her finger. Since we’re already probing into our past, I decide I might as well tell Blesk everything I know.

I begin talking from on the corner of the bed, while she sits cross-legged on the carpet.

"My biological mother died, as you probably know." I mention.

*But I'm not sure why.*

"She died a few years after I was taken. My biological father thought it would be best if I get a fresh start. He didn't want me to go through my life experiencing nothing but pity and having people treat me like I was broken or damaged. So, he never came to collect me, and instead, put me up for adoption." I exhale loudly and admit, "At least that's what they told me."

"You've never met him. Never wanted to?"

"Nope."

"Why? Did the adoption upset you?" she asks, with that exact level of pity that makes my biological dad's decision justifiable.

"No. I had very little memory of him anyway, or my bio-mum, so a clean slate seemed fine. To be honest, from the moment I got free, the only person I wanted to see, the only person I wanted to be with, was you."

She reaches out and rubs my knee. "*Tabula rasa.*"

I blink at her questioningly and guffaw. "Harry Potter spell?"

She giggles. "It's Latin. It means "scraped tablet," but usually gets translated into "blank slate." I guess we both received a *tabula rasa*, in a way. I feel our personal circumstances are more akin to the "scraped tablet" translation, though. I mean, it wasn't blank, it was scraped."

"Such a smart cookie, Duch. Maybe that'll be my first tat," I laugh.

She glares at me. "Don't you dare mark that beautiful skin."

I slap my knee theatrically before saying, "Oh man, but all the other kids'll tease me."

Rolling her eyes and ignoring my comment, she points to an old candid image with her delicate finger. "Who is that in the photo? She has your eyes, Konnor."

I blink at it for a while, strangely apathetic. "I have hers. That's my bio-mum when she was in high school."

She offers me a smile. "She's beautiful, Konnor."

I nod and remain aloof. "I suppose she is."

"Do you know these other people?" she asks, running her finger over their faces.

I stare at it for a while. "That's Dad, Ben. I don't recognise the others. They all went to school together."

She lifts a blonde brow. "Coincidence?"

I shrug, dubious. "It's The District, Duch. Everyone knows everyone. There are like four-degrees of separation here."

"Less I suppose when they were growing up," she says, flicking through pages and seemingly unimpressed with the spread on the floor in front of her. Her brows tighten and her shoulders drop on a sigh. "This is just useless stuff and articles we could find online" She stays seated and squashes her nose up at me, pouting. "Did Ben ever tell you why he adopted you?"

Nodding, I shuffle back along the mattress and cross my legs in front of me.

"Yes, my bio-mum and Ben were close in high school, so when the cops found me, he did everything in his power to get me. He knew my story, and I think he loved my bio mum. I think he loved her a lot. He wanted to make sure my future would be better than my past. I guess he didn't want to leave it up to chance. He has always been quite forthright with me about it."

She tilts her head at me. "What makes you say he loved your bio-mum?"

I shrug and chew on the inside of my mouth, contemplating. "Sometimes he looks at me with this weird expression. Then he sighs and tells me how much I look like her. I don't know really, it's just a feeling I get, like I should be comforting him or something. It's hard to explain."

"It's plain to see he loves you, Konnor. You're his son in every way but blood. My parents always wanted a girl, and apparently when my mum saw me, she fell in love with me. She used to tell me the story of when she first laid eyes on me. I was so tiny, so slim, with nearly platinum blonde hair and pink cheeks. And although she said I didn't look sad, I wasn't smiling. I was wandering around the orphanage playroom, straightening all the dolls, tucking their clothes in and positioning them neatly on the shelves. She didn't try to talk to me. She just started helping me clean up the mess all the other kids had left behind. We did this together for nearly an hour, and every so often, we would share a glance and a half-smile.

She was a saint. The kind of woman who would demand the runt of the litter when picking a puppy. That was me. The underdog. She said it was love at first sight. I never told her this but it was for me, too. I remember thinking she was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. A foreign princess, with her long dark hair and dark eyes. Like Jasmine from *Aladdin*.

And she had this voice, so soft, so full of passion.” Blesk sighs, with a subtle melancholic smile.

“I remember when she got cancer, and I read this article that suggested peaches may have a therapeutic effect on cancer cells. I went straight out and spent my whole allowance on baby peach trees. They took ages to grow. But peaches were your favourite fruit, remember? So, I kind of loved being the one who nursed them and saw them grow. I missed seeing you grow. It made me happy. I missed you.”

*What do I say to that?*

I smile down at her, taken aback by that adorable sparkle of recollection in her eye. “Words,” I sigh, “I have none, just... I love you.”

She stifles a happy tear. “I love you too, baby. What’s your adoptive mum like?”

“You’ll meet her soon. You can decide for yourself.”

“Come on, Konnor?” she pleads, peering up at me with those big doe eyes.

“Okay, Duch. We are doing some touchy-feely stuff, hey? Not really the touchy-feely stuff I had in mind, but I’ll oblige.” I chuckle. “Well... Renee is awesome. She’s a little like Cassidy. A bit eccentric, a little weird. I like her a lot, she—” My words get caught dead in my larynx when something catches my eye. The air seems to thicken. I squint as I lean down and pick up a bank statement with a \$5,100,000 deposit. “That’s a hefty transaction,” I murmur under my breath. I check the sending account: Lumad, LTD. My breath catches.

*Why do I recognise that account?*

I glance at the name displayed on the top of the sheet: Donavon Pemberton. I check the date of the deposit: August 22, 1999. Blesk follows my line of sight and then darts between the statement and my tight expression. My brain is in overdrive, calculating. I can feel my face harden, my brows drawing together.

“What is it?” she asks, looking anxious.

I shake my head, because what I’m looking at must be a typo.

“What is it, Konnor?” she says again, her voice hiking up and down with nerves.

I motion with my hand. “Give me that news article, the one from when I went missing.”

She picks it up and hands it up to me. I check the date. August 22, 1999. My fingers feel numb as they hold this weightless document that seems impossibly heavy. I jump up and grab my phone, dialling so fast that I type the wrong number twice. “Dammit!” I grunt, smacking the phone on the wall because it feels good to do it and to take my tension out on the useless device in my hand that can’t keep up with my impossibly fast-moving fingers. I begin to type again, and then wait for the tone to drop.

“Adolf!” I say through the handset. “Konnor Slater.”

“Mr. Slater, is everything alright? How can I be of service?”

“I need you to go into my apartment. Go into the top drawer of my bedside table and take a photo of the invoice in there with your phone. Then send it to me.” My voice is curt, and I’m clutching the phone so tightly, my palms are losing all colour and sensitivity.

There is an uncomfortable pause.

“Sir, what’s this about?” he enquires, his tone wary.

“Adolf, I’m sorry to ask this of you, but I need you to do this. I’m in Brussman, and I won’t be home ’til later tonight. I need to see that invoice.”

He clears his throat. “Of course, sir. I will go up right now.”

“Thank you,” I hang up rather abruptly. I turn to look at Blesk, her face opaque with worry.

“Konnor?” she says, on the brink of tears.

“Give me one second, Duch. I’ll explain everything in a second, okay?”

I walk out the room and down the staircase. Walking straight to the bar, I pour myself a much-needed bourbon. My hands shake wildly, chinking the ice-blocks around the glass. I take a sip. It really doesn’t suffice so I throw the whole contents back into my throat. I pour myself another. I wait. And then my phone buzzes within my pocket. Without considering the possible ramifications of the information I’m about to discover, I open the phone and check the new multimedia message attached to Adolf’s name.

My body turns to stone when I see the document that confirms my fears.

*It’s all a lie.*

Everything I have believed in. Everything I built for myself on this foundation of family, Cassidy, Flick, Ben, Renee, the Slater family... It’s all a lie. I run up the staircase two steps at a time.

“Duch! This account,” I rush through the door and lower myself to sit beside her on the floor. “This account, Lumad, LTD, it’s the same account that paid my tuition this year. It’s the same account that I saw on a

sponsorship invoice for the new sporting precinct. Adolf just sent me a picture of it. It's the same account. It's the same *fucking* account, Duch!" My voice is panicked, and the words are hurtling from my mouth too fast to allow for adequate air intake.

She exhales in a rush. "Okay. Slow down. What does that mean?"

"The same person who transferred your bio father, Donovan Pemberton, over \$5,000,000 on August the 22nd 1999, the same day I was taken, also paid my tuition this year."

"What are you saying?"

"Ben and Renee Slater paid your father to take me."

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## TWENTY-FOUR: Deakon

“Deakon? My name is Ben Slater. I’m a friend. Do you mind if I sit with you?”

A gentle-looking man approaches and stands by the boy’s side, a half-smile tight on his lips. The boy gave up a few days ago. But unlike before, he now knows when the days pass because he stares at the ticking hand as it slowly circles around the clock face.

The boy has gotten more attention than ever before. The people at the hospital are always checking him, testing him, putting him in machines that beep and clank. They stab him with needles, take blood from him, and add fluids. They are helping.

*Go away, the boy thinks to himself. Just go away.*

One of the men from yesterday, when the big hand was at the two and the little at the five, had called him *hostile*. He doesn’t even know what that means. There is this weight in his belly that won’t go away, and he feels full, and nauseous, and yet empty at the same time. The boy scowls.

*They said they’d protect her.*

The boy turns his stare to the window and watches the outside world. The same world he is both desperate and terrified to see. He loves looking at the sky. He hasn’t stopped since the nurse opened the window when the big hand was at the ten and the little was at the seven. The man takes a seat on the visitor’s chair, and shuffles to make himself comfortable. The boy has watched that spot for days. It’s always been empty, until now.

“You have very green eyes, Deakon,” the man says, and then coughs awkwardly. “You know what, Deakon. I’m not sure what you remember, but if you want to talk... If you want to talk about it, well, you can talk to me. It’s what I do.” He chuckles, and the boy flashes a quick look at him. “I have two little girls. They both talk my ears off. I’m an excellent listener.”

The man waits patiently while the boy scowls at the sky, his face cold, his thoughts wrestling with one another, wanting company but hating the

kind he has recently received. *Adults lie*, he thought to himself. *They are all liars.*

The man starts to talk again. “The nurse told me that you haven’t spoken to anyone since yesterday. Is that true?” He waits for an answer but knows he won’t receive one. “Well that’s okay. Like I said, I have two little girls that do plenty of talking. Felicity is only a few years older than you; she is eleven. Cassidy is only five, and she’s here today. Would you like to meet her?”

The man watches the boy’s face intently, and the boy tries hard not to look intrigued by his offer.

*I would like to meet them. Kids don’t lie. Even when it’s hard. Even when it hurts.*

The boy’s eyes move to the man, and he can no longer keep his interest a secret. Liz was four when he met her, and he can count to five, so he understands that is nearly half his age. He misses her. The boy nods, just once.

The man smiles. “Okay, but first, can you do me a favour? Cassidy is still very little, and she needs someone to look after her. Do you think while I go to get a coffee, you could watch over her?”

A flutter of excitement fills his chest, and the allure of importance causes him to nod again, but he still doesn’t smile.

The older man, who the boy doesn’t hate as much as the others, stands and says, “I will get her.”

Once the man is outside, the boy jolts up and waits, peering through the open doorway. A few short moments pass, and the man walks in, tailed by a small blonde girl. The boy sucks a quick breath in.

*She is smaller than Liz.*

*Blonde hair like Liz.*

*I like her.*

The girl grins, showing her gapped teeth, bright and white. Her cheeks rosy and full of character. The boy’s eyes widen when she rushes over to him, crawls on the bed and wriggles over to his side, curling her knees up and facing him on the pillow they now share. The boy stares at her hazel eyes that are filled with laughter and courage and confidence, and he wishes he’d seen that look on Liz. The girl’s knee presses against the boy’s, and he wants to move it away, but doesn’t. The girl giggles.



The boy turns to look at the man and tilts his head when he notices the man staring back with a strange expression. That is when the boy realises, he is smiling. He is smiling at the little girl.

“I always wanted a brava,” the little girl says.

*I like her.*

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## TWENTY-FIVE: Blesk

There have been defining moments with Konnor that will stay with me forever, despite the blessing and curse of time and how it can conveniently erase significant memories from my mind. I definitely won't forget the chilling expression on his face when he said, "Ben and Renee Slater paid your father to take me."

He's seething. His cheek muscles are dancing under his skin as he rushes up the staircase towards his dad's room. With his fists pumping at his side, his whole back almost out-of-worldly rigid, his feet take him as fast as possible to the top floor. The thundering of his heels hitting the floor as he walks the hall is inundating.

I chase after him. "Konnor, wait!"

I feel like I'm going to break, from his pain. His whole world is crumbling... again. I barely notice how much I'm crying, or how wet my face is, as I follow him to the top floor. He swings open a door, walking straight up to a wide-eyed, startled Ben, and slams the bank statement down onto his desk.

"Fucking explain that!" he growls, livid.

What happens if Ben did pay off my father? Shouldn't we be calling the police, preparing for some kind of retaliation to the truth being unveiled?

Ben stands. "Son, what is going on here?"

"Don't fucking call me 'son'." Konnor sneers and flings his arms around in an attempt to eliminate some tension clawing at them. "Why have you been lying to me?"

Ben looks at my alarmed face, and then back to Konnor, who seems to have grown taller somehow, his anger manifesting itself in his physical presence. "Explain!" he yells, pointing to the statement. Konnor is pacing, unable to keep still. He prowls the room, scowling at Ben as if he were prey. Every little noise, every little creak from the air escaping the wood beneath his feet, every little flap from the document, seems to be

heightened. He is on the edge of a complete mental breakdown. His eyes are barely slits, and I have never seen him look less like Konnor.

I soften my stance. "Konnor, ple—"

He spins to face me, clutches my shoulders, and stares down at me. "Duch, if you need to leave, leave now... there is nothing left to restrain me." The broken boy looking back at me chips at a piece of my heart. He releases me and turns back to his dad. "Answers, now!"

My heart races.

Ben pulls his glasses up his nose, looking fretful and disorientated. He takes his eyes off Konnor and peers down at the statement that is now in his hands. He mouths silently while he reads until a word transforms his face.

*Realisation?*

*Devastation?*

*Perhaps both...*

He closes his eyes and grips the paper, white knuckled, crinkling and ripping the parts enclosed within his fist.

He groans under his breath. "Nerrock."

The negative energy pouring off Konnor is tangible. Ben's eyes fly open and find me, caution flashing within them. He doesn't know my involvement in all of this, and more than likely has been keeping this secret from everyone. For how long?

"Blesk, you shouldn't be here for this," he states, curtly.

Every part of me but one wanted to run, to flee like I always do. But my heart and love for Konnor kept me rooted to my spot.

Konnor jolts towards Ben warningly, pointing at his chest. "Don't talk to her. Don't you dare even look at her. She stays as long as she wants!"

He glowers at Konnor. "You want her to know everything, then?"

"She knows more than you do!" Konnor hisses.

Ben's eyes dart hesitantly between us, before he agrees, "Fine. Everyone sit and I'll explain."

Konnor huffs. "You don't get to make demands now. Tell me why you have been lying to me. Tell me what that means." Konnor motions towards the document laying on the expensive jarrah office desk. Someone puts their hand on my back, and I jump. I cover my face, everything is so intense right now, and making me fear for everyone involved. I feel like at any moment, I may need to rush over and pry Konnor off his own father.

A person behind me wraps their arms around my shoulders protectively, and I catch a glimpse of blonde hair.

“Everything okay in here?” I hear Jaxon ask sternly. “Should I take Blesk away?”

Konnor turns to Jaxon. “No, Jax, she should stay. I want her to stay.” He looks at me, or rather, the person wearing Konnor’s face looks at me. “Do you want to stay?”

*I want to suck it up.*

*Be strong for Konnor.*

I nod. “Yes.”

“Mind if I stay?” Jaxon asks, taking a seat and positioning himself in a manner that presents his question as more of a statement.

If things get out of control, I know I can count on Jaxon to step in. He pulls me down onto his lap and holds me there as I sob quietly. Konnor eyeballs us momentarily, and then nods.

Jaxon strokes my shoulders with both big hands, and subtly tries to soothe me. “You okay, B?”

“Yeah, it just hurts, seeing Konnor so lost,” I murmur. “Where’s Elise?”

“She sent me up to check on you,” he whispers into my hair. “She doesn’t want to intrude.” Konnor eyes us while we covertly talk to each other.

Ben rubs his hands together, and then places both palms on the desk in front of him, stabilising himself. “Konnor, what do you remember why Dustin Nerrock gave you up for adoption?” he asks cautiously.

Konnor scoffs and scowls as he turns to look at Ben. “I have a better idea. Why don’t you just talk. Tell me what I know or what I don’t.” There is not even a glimpse of warmth in Konnor’s voice or eyes. I hear someone suck a sharp breath in behind me. Konnor’s face crumbles when he sees who it is.

“What’s going on?” Cassidy asks from the doorway. “Why are you yelling at each other?”

Konnor walks up to Cassidy. “You should leave, Cass.”

Ben stands and quickly approaches his daughter, causing Konnor to noticeably stiffen.

“Cassidy, sweetheart, this is Konnor’s business,” Ben presses. “It isn’t something you need to be involved in.”

Her narrowed eyes focus on Ben, and a lethal expression transforms her face. "If it's his business, then it's mine."

"Sweetheart, it's—" Ben begins.

"No," she snaps. "I'm not leaving until I know why my two favourite people are yelling at each other." She turns back to meet Ben's anxious face, and the severity in her eyes is not to be ignored. Ben nods and then moves back to his desk, before almost falling on to his chair. He looks like a man whose whole world has just permanently shifted off its axis. He looks the epitome of destroyed.

Cassidy crosses her arms and leans on the door frame, challenging Konnor to object with her uncompromising stare.

Konnor tilts his head, and I see the slightest smile creep onto his face. "Fine, Cassidy."

Ben clears his throat, and we all acknowledge that as an attempt to gain our attention.

"So, you don't want me to ask questions, Konnor. That's fine. But then I can't distinguish what information you have, and so I'm going to just lay it all on the table, and between the two of us we can sift through the pieces and hopefully come out with a puzzle that looks like a picture. I went to school with your mother, Madeline. I'm yet to meet a woman who could summon the kind of infatuation that woman could. She was wild and intriguing and sharp as a razor, with the biggest green eyes and a strange mind. But she was also very insecure and often troubled. She thought too much, and that always led her to the horizon, looking for something more." He looks down at his desk, moving the paper under his fingers.

"She married Nerrock not long after high school. They had a son." Ben's brows furrow. "They looked beautiful together, and their son was picture perfect. It wasn't until later that these rumours started to circulate. You all know what The District is like with gossip. Well, the rumour was that Deakon Nerrock . . ." his voice falters and he peers over at Konnor. "That you weren't Dustin's son."

"Now, Dustin's family has a lot of money. They are one of the founders of The District and are deeply rooted in Catholicism. Adultery was completely reprehensible. People loved the rumour. I mean, Dustin and Madeline were political celebrities and the envy of everyone. Their love, life, and every moment caught on camera, and plastered all over The District. Which made what happened even more impressive. Because,

Christ, the whole world watched them, and yet this happened right under everyone's noses. You were taken. Missing."

Konnor leans against the wall; the aggression has left him. Without the adrenaline that had made him a giant, he was now rendered to a shell. He takes one fist in his hand and cracks his knuckles. I don't know how to help him.

*But I can try...*

I stand and wander over, slouching against the wall to his side and tilt my head to look at his sad profile. He turns to look at me and I see defeat.

Ben continues, "I'd be lying if I said I liked Dustin, but I never thought he'd go so far as to have a child kidnapped. I thought he might, well . . . I worried about your mother's safety, but not yours. You were just a child. Who would hurt a child? Especially not you, the golden child of The District." He shakes his head. "I hadn't realised how far he went until now."

My chest flutters, feeling lighter than it should. Ben looks distressed, and his face twists with anguish before he speaks again. "I don't know for sure, Konnor. I have no proof. But if this statement is true, then someone paid that man to take you."

A small gasp escapes Cassidy.

"And I know in my heart that it wasn't Madeline, so that leaves . . . Well, Dustin and Madeline's account."

"That's bullshit, such bullshit. Money came from that fucking account for my tuition! How's that possible? Answer that question!" Konnor presses his forehead against the wall and groans. "I saw it, Ben," he says to the plasterboard. "The invoice was clearly made out to the university for my tuition."

"Konnor, your mother handed the rights to that account over to me a few weeks before she died. She said it was for you and you alone if you were ever found or ever returned. That money would have gone to Dustin's other children, his future children, and she knew she didn't have much time left. So, I have been using the funds for your tuition and for anything else I see fit. We didn't need the money, of course, but it was important to Madeline that it go to you."

"You loved her," Konnor states, turning toward us and fixing his emerald eyes on us all. He presses our shoulders together, before whispering to me, "I just need to feel you next to me."

I lean more of my body weight on him.

Ben peers at Cassidy, hesitantly. "I love your mum, Cassidy, but, yes, Konnor, Madeline was my *first* love."

Konnor considers this information for several seconds, hope flashing in his eyes. "Okay, so are you my dad? I mean are you my *biological dad*?"

Disappointment washes over Ben's face as he regretfully shakes his head. "No, Konnor. I wish I was. You're my son, but you're not my blood. I'm sorry. I don't know who is. She never told me."

That fleeting sparkle leaves Konnor's face and he breathes out. "So, you two had planned my adoption? Before they even found me? That's such crap."

Cassidy shakes her head, adamantly. "That makes *zero* sense. This sounds like fricking B.S, dad. When kids go missing and they aren't found for *four fricking years*, don't people just, kind of," she looks around apologetically, "assume they're dead?"

"Madeline never gave up hope, not for a second. I don't know if she suspected foul play because she never told me. We very rarely spoke Konnor; we never discussed the adoption. I received a letter in the mail one day, and it just said that I was entrusted to make sure you received the money if you were found, or that it went to her charity if you weren't." His eyes drop to the desk, and unmistakable sadness flashes across his face. "It was from a lawyer. She didn't even send it herself."

Then the look is gone, and he's back to staring at Konnor.

"I'm not sure if you have heard about this, but Madeline started a charity for you. Nerrock Missing and Beyond. It is for lost children and their families. This is *your* legacy, Konnor. If you were never found. If you were just... *gone*. All the money would have been donated in your name. That was Madeline's wish. Well, that was what the letter said."

"You never tried to talk to her?" Konnor presses. "Face-to-face?"

"Of course I did," he states curtly.

I don't like his tone, but given the circumstances, I understand it.

Ben sighs. "I was completely disconnected from her. No one would let me speak to her."

"Did she know?" Konnor asks. "Did she know Dustin had something to do with my disappearance?"

Ben holds his hands up calmly. "Slow down. Firstly, we don't know he did for sure. We are just speculating here, and only because you came in here, guns blazing. But since we are, I can admit it crossed *my* mind. It was

very peculiar that months after the rumours of your legitimacy as a Nerrock began, you went missing.”

Konnor huffs disapprovingly. “She stayed with him anyway?”

“Even if she did suspect him, you don’t divorce people like Dustin Nerrock. It’s too... dangerous,” Ben states, and his tone is strangely evasive.

I watch Cassidy as she absorbs this information, and I get the feeling she won’t take kindly to him lying to Konnor. Or lying to her. Our eyes meet momentarily, and then hers bounce back to Ben. I can’t read her.

Konnor shrugs. “I don’t understand.”

Ben stretches his hands up and clasp them behind his head. The leather of the chair creaks beneath his shifting body. “I know you don’t,” he sighs. “Because I have worked very hard to keep you kids out of that world. The District streets are run by The Families, and the whole structure is corrupted. They are just dangerous company to keep, and even more so to marry into.”

Jaxon’s eyes widen. “So, what, like the mob?”

“Something like that,” Ben admits cautiously.

“And Nerrock is involved?” I ask, glancing between Konnor and Ben.

“Well, he would deny it,” Ben confirms. “They are just businessmen, Blesk.”

Konnor takes a few methodical steps closer to Ben. His tone drops as he says, “Are you involved with them?”

Ben looks offended. “God, no!”

My breath catches. “Is my... I mean, the man who took Konnor, was he involved?” I ask, not really considering my question before the words escape my lips.

*Breathe in and out.*

“I don’t know, Blesk,” Ben replies, looking around the room and trying to reassure us with his calm expression.

“Whoa, this is a bit intense. Konnor, you’re a mafia kid,” Jaxon says, in an almost naïve awe.

“No, I’m not! I’m a Slater,” Konnor states forcefully.

Cassidy steps forward and looks at her father, avoiding Konnor’s eyes. “Is Butcher one of them?” she asks.

“Cassidy, why?” Konnor grumbles. “Why would it matter?”



Dodging Konnor's glare, she says, "Just wondering. Flick hangs out with them a lot now."

Konnor moves towards her until she has to arch her neck to catch his line of sight. "You're lying," he states, looking her straight in the eye. "Why do you care about the Butcher Boys. Why is that name even coming up?" Konnor's voice raises ever so slightly.

"They are our friends, Konnor. That's all," she moans.

His brows dart up. "Oh, so now they're 'our' friends? Not just Flick's friends anymore?"

*What's happening here?*

"Konnor," I say, moving to touch his hand and pacify him.

"Son, what is your qualm with them?" Ben asks. "Do you know something I don't?"

His face tightens. "Don't like them, that's all. I don't want Cassidy hanging out with them."

Cassidy snorts. "Well, I guess it's a good thing I'm not five anymore and can do what I fucking like."

"Cassidy, calm down," Ben states. "Your brother just worries."

"Great, now I have a restriction on friends."

"You're acting like a brat, Cassidy," Konnor snaps.

"I'm acting like an eighteen-year-old girl who is being interrogated by her brother because she has 'boys' who are friends. Can you be more clichéd? I bet you wish I were gay like Flick."

"Not boys, Cassidy. *Butcher* boys," Konnor states with disdain.

"We are digressing," Ben states. "These aren't conversations we shouldn't be having. Nor are they necessary. Luca Butcher's sons are not the issue here, and you're not in any kind of danger."

I peer at Konnor, and his eyes bounce quickly to me when we share a thought.

*Who tried to kill me in that hospital?*

"This should go without saying," Ben continues, "but this is Konnor's business. None of this can leave this room." Ben darts his eyes between us, finally singling out Konnor. "Konnor, if you want to make arrangements to discuss this further with other parties, then you can, but it should be discussed here, with me first. I can't stress this enough. Everything I've done, all the truths I've withheld, have been for you. Promise me you won't go ruffling feathers. Okay?"

Konnor slowly nods. "Does Nerrock know? Does he know where I am?"

"Yes, of course," Ben says. "He knows who you are, Konnor, and where you are. But you're not in any danger. It's over. You're mine. Trust me."

My stomach twists up. "How can you be so sure?"

"Trust me," he repeats.

*Please, God, let him be telling the truth.*

Ben rises to his feet and walks over to his son. "Do you? Do you trust me?" He places his hand on Konnor's shoulder and squeezes tenderly.

Konnor stares at his dad's hand, squinting and tight-lipped. The wheels are churning in his head, and the seconds that pass are long and torturous for everyone, especially Ben.

Creases line his forehead as his brow lift and he exhales a strengthening breath. "I trust you, Dad."

My shoulders loosen and a smile plays on my face. If Konnor trusts him, then I do, too.

We spend the rest of the day in the car, the streets of The District passing us by and the darkness of what happened there left behind. The clean air that hits us when we leave the city is not only physically relieving, but emotionally too. Campus seems to have changed since we left two days ago. Somehow it looks smaller. Truth be told, it is us who have changed. Jaxon and Elise are fully integrated into our secrets, into our past. We know why Konnor was taken. I know what my father looks like, what he sounds like.

I feel lighter. Free. Because Konnor and I share this story, and this life together. We may never trust anyone enough to uncover the truth about who tried to kill me in the hospital, but we have a support system around us now, and I'm okay with leaving the darkness... in the dark. It is not like we are forgetting the past. We are just moving forward right now, not back, and definitely not into a world we don't understand or even want to.

*Accepting blissful ignorance...*

Is it naive to decide that after everything we have been through what we really deserve right now is to find peace and comfort in our togetherness? Then that is what we are.

For we are two kids without mothers and with absent biological fathers. We have no blood sibling, and for the first time in my life, I'm okay with that. Maybe one day we will have our own family. They will have our blood

and we will give them everything we missed out on, *and* they will give *us* everything we missed out on.

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## TWENTY-SIX: Liz

She can hear people speaking, and even though she can't see their faces, she can tell they are concerned. The quiver in their voices, deep tones, and intermittent words reach her through her slumber. She is exhausted. The girl could sleep for a year and still feel the need for more. This is the first time she has allowed herself to become vulnerable, and just... finally... relax. She feels safe. Safer than she may have ever felt before, and she knows he is here with her, in this same hospital. She knows he is fine. The girl listens to footsteps approach and feels movement at her side. The mattress sinks. A warm hand touches hers. A gentle, feminine voice speaks.

“Oh, you’ve been through something haven’t you, little girl?” she sighs softly. “I want you to know that you’re safe now and that you can wake up. I know you’re tired hurting, but we need to know you’re okay. Please, little one, it’s time to wake up.”

The hand moves to her forehead, and the girl shivers beneath its tender caress. She wants to sleep for longer, despite the pleading tone coming from the lady on her bed.

The girl wonders why she must wake up. She hasn’t any chores left to do, or the boy to look after any more. Can’t she just sleep now?

She vaguely recalls the past five hours. She knows they escaped, and the police found him first. She knows because she watched from behind a tree as he panicked in their grasps. Then, there is a space in time between the moment when Kon finally gave into the officer and stopped fighting, and when the policeman scooped her up off the floor in her father’s cupboard. She remembers the officer cradling her in his arms, and she remembers how he held her with protective confidence. She remembers him laying her down and covering her up. She remembers the noise of the hospital, and the bed moving under lights. That is all she remembers.

Now she just wants to sleep and feel the unfamiliar gentleness of this stranger who seems to care for her.

“Okay, little one, you sleep. I will be here when you wake up. You’re such a brave girl, do you know that? You are safe now. We promise you’re safe now. I have hidden your unicorn under your pillow for when you wake up.”

*My unicorn.*

The mattress lifts as she moves, and then the footsteps disappear into the distance. The girl swallows and feels the empty room as if it were an entity apart. She doesn’t mind being alone usually. She just really liked the warmth of that stranger.

She doesn’t open her eyes yet and lies in the silence until she hears footsteps again, faster, deeper, heavier steps.

“Get it over with,” she hears a gruff voice say.

It all happens so quickly. The body is beside her. A pillow is pressed against her face. It is soft. Then it isn’t. It is hard and unforgiving, and she can’t breathe.

*I can’t breathe.*

She tries to moan. Her eyes open and widen, but she sees only white cotton. Her hands fly up to scratch at the pressure, and then she considers giving up, giving into the escape, letting them take her. It is easier. Something stops her from doing that: fear, adrenaline, anger . . .

*Kon.*

She reaches her hand behind her head and pulls out her unicorn, slashing the air with it. She uses all her strength to fend off the pressure, but she is too little, too weak.

The same voice snaps. “Hurry up!”

Relentlessly she swings, gasps, and groans, and blinks puddles into the fabric over her eyes. She hits something, and a grunt precedes further pressure behind the pillow. She loses energy, her arms are weightless, and then there is no air.

## TWENTY- SEVEN: Blesk

“So, it says five to seven days, baby,” I say, sitting on Konnor’s bed with my legs crossed in front of me. He paces the room, a hand on either hip, his head shaking slowing with unease.

His brows weave. “What if I get aggressive and upset you?”

“I’ll call Jaxon or Adolf,” I confirm with an adamant nod. He’s worried he may act out and ruin what we have, potentially changing my perspective of him. I’m not worried. My faith in his strength of character is completely irrevocable and infinite. I know it will be hard. I also know he can do it.

Konnor releases some anxiety by rubbing his palms down his face. “Yeah, but will you think different of me?”

“Konnor, nothing in this world would make me prouder of you,” I confess, watching his internal debate with sympathy.

He moves over to sit beside me and places his hand attentively on my naked thigh. “What if—”

“Stop what if-ing! You can do this,” I state emphatically. “You can do anything.”

He searches my expression, exhaling long and loudly. “Fine,” he nods. “Read it to me again.”

I read from my iPhone. “‘Stage one is anxiety, nausea, and abdominal pains.’”

He groans. “Can’t wait for that magic.”

“‘Stage two is high blood pressure, increased body temperature, and unusual heart rate.’”

“Yay!” he mocks.

I giggle and talk through my smile. “‘And stage three is hallucinations, fever, and agitation.’”

“Okay. . . well, we know I would do just about anything for you.” His eyes roll over my face lovingly. “Scrap that. I would do anything for you.”

I lean in and press my lips to his mouth, humming through our quick chaste kiss. “All you have to do is show up and I’ll be impressed. What we are doing now, this is for *you*.”

He beams at me, displaying those undeniable dimples. “I’m in.”

I grin up at him, filled to the brim with pride. “I have all sorts of beverages in the fridge, lollies, chocolate, and lots of greasy food for Justin.”

His face tightens. “Who the fuck is Justin?”

I giggle. “Just-in case.”

“Your puns are adorable. I thought I was about to have to kill some guy named Justin,” he teases, walking over to the sink. His shoulders sag on a sigh as he unscrews the cap of the first bottle of bourbon and empties it down the drain. “Detox, here I come.”

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Blesk and Konnor's story is not over, but to tell it, we must digress.

The District Series Book 2

*Girls dream about boys like him. He is perfect: tall, strong, sculptured like a statue of a Greek God, and he has these eyes. . . they are. . . hypnotising, soul sucking. They are deep blue, basically grey, and when they give you their attention you are useless against their charm. Every glance they offer you is like your own personal accolade. They are like a whirlwind, or a tornado, or a vacuum, manipulating everything in their line-of-sight.*

*He is just so. . . Max Butcher.*

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# Acknowledgments

This has been a work in progress for five years. I saved enough money to take nearly a year off and work on this book (and others) because I want more than anything to write for a living. And to write romance novels and make a crust, well, that would be the dream.

I talked about *The District* constantly. I dreamed about it. I love this story. But I wasn't sure I could do 'their' story justice as this is my first novel. I have learnt a lot and hope that I continue to improve with each book in the series.

I sent this book to an editor after that year. I paid a pretty penny. A month later I received my Manuscript in the mail. I was so excited. That big white envelope was all I'd thought about since I posted it to him, my editor - my professional, Literary Agent, editor.

Well, he crushed me. He hated it. There was very little editing and just a whole heap of criticism. He hated the characters. He hated the story. He was belittling and it still hurts to think about. This was the most important thing I had ever done, and I love these characters. So, I locked myself away for days, and cried. I stopped writing for a while. Finally, I wrote a review about his review, in which I commented on every little thing he said. I never sent it. But it was cathartic.

My first acknowledgement goes out to this editor. Thank you for your criticism. Thank you for making me cry, and for every negative word. I am sure, as an author, I will continue to experience this and so thank you for this lesson in reality. It has only made me stronger.

**Thank you.**

My next acknowledgement is for my aunty, Penny, who helped pull me out of my depression after this incident. She sat with me, and we went over the novel. We critiqued it together. She taught me a few very important lessons.

*1: When you read a review, or edit suggestion, consider who the authority on the subject is before accepting it.*

*2: Your book is not going to be liked by everyone. Consider your demographic before you hire an editor or beta reader.*

*3: Someone will like your book!*

**Thank you, Penny Cookson.**

I used these pieces of gold to utilise this editors' suggestions in a methodical and unemotional way. I improved my story. I improved my writing. And it dawned on me that sending a new adult love story to a conservative middle-aged man might not give me the best insight into its worth.

So with this in mind, I sent it to two beta readers, and two new editors. They liked it. Yay! There was a mixture of praise and criticism and that was perfectly fine with me.

I fine-tuned further, and although I didn't take *all* their advice, I took a lot of it.

So to my editors Swati Hedge and Jessica Swift, you are amazing.

**Thank you, Swati Hedge.**

**[www.swatihedge.com](http://www.swatihedge.com)**

**Thank you, Jessica Swift.**

**[www.facebook.com/SwiftInkEditor/](https://www.facebook.com/SwiftInkEditor/)**

My final acknowledgment is to Gabby D'annunzio, my best friend, who loves The District Series and all its characters as much as me. It was your eagerness to hear every new idea and your excitement over each character

development, that kept me going. I miss our many nights swapping ideas over our home-made margaritas.

**Thank you, Gabby D'annunzio.**

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