

INCLUDES NEVER BEFORE RELEASED
BONUS CONTENT

THE QUARANTINE SERIES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
DRETHI ANIS

THE QUARANTINE SERIES

OceanofPDF.com

DRETHI ANIS

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THE QUARANTINE SERIES

DRETHI ANIS

INCLUDES:

BOOK 1: QUARANTINED

BOOK 1.5: DESOLATE

BOOK 2: ISOLATION

BOOK3: ESSENTIAL

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BLURB

****CONTAINS NEVER-BEFORE-SEEN BONUS MATERIAL****

New York City—not a place for the faint-hearted or the sweetest of souls.

After all these years, I never expected to be back in the city—least of all, to be back in this house. The place where it all started, the very place I’ve spent years avoiding. All because of him.

But I have no choice. We are all quarantined together in this house. It took the end of the world for me to come back here and face him.

Milo Sinclair.

Once my legal guardian and savior in life. The person who saved me from drowning in loneliness. Who gave me everything I ever wanted. But then he took everything away from me. Plus interest. He broke me once. I will not let him break me twice.

*Please note that this box set includes bonus content. The chapters are edited to accommodate the transitions of the bonus scenes and optimize the

story's flow. As a result, the box set slightly varies from the individual books, which are still available in their original formats.

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INTRODUCTION

The conception of this series came from my personal tipping point in 2020. When the pandemic started, I fell and the injuries had me confined to my bed with my leg propped on a pillow. Like many others, I wasn't working and not by my choice. I was going stir-crazy, most of it stemming from my worry over an uncertain future.

Writing became my therapy. I considered how my situation could be worse. The first thing to come to mind: Thank God I'm not quarantined with my crazy family. The second thing to come to mind: Thank God I'm not quarantined with a crazy ex.

After five days, hours of typing, and carpal tunnel syndrome, I sent the pages to a friend, who suggested splitting the book into three parts: past, present, and future. She defined it as descent into madness, healing, and happily ever after.

The point of this long note was to tell you how the series came about and also to disclose my headspace while writing it. This book isn't for the faintest of hearts, and the subject matter is heavy. Please do heed the warnings.

Dark romance is subjective. Some readers have found this book to be a light read, while others were triggered. This fictional series is **ONLY** meant for readers who enjoy a specific trope in the realm of fantasy.

Triggers include mental health issues, rape, dubious consent. While it wasn't the main topic of discussion, I wrote this series due to the pandemic, which served as the backdrop of this book.

- Drethi Anis

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Dedicated to all my friends who struggled during the pandemic. Let's make something better out of something bad.

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I also want to acknowledge my wonderful team.
Thank you, Julia, for steering this ship in the right direction.
My dearest Angie, writers are nothing without their editors.

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PLAYLIST

Love The Way You Lie – Eminem, Rihanna
Toxic – Britney Spears
Love On The Brain – Rihanna
Bleeding Love – Leona Lewis
Stupid in Love – Melt
Rock Bottom – Hailee Steinfeld, DNCE
Going Under – Evanescence
Back to Black – Amy Winehouse
Hotter Than Hell – Dua Lipa
Irresistible – Fall Out Boy, Demi Lovato

You can find the playlist on [Spotify](#).

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QUARANTINED

DRETHI ANIS

BOOK ONE OF THE QUARANTINE SERIES

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PROLOGUE

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MARCH 13, 2020



*Karens ignore explicit warnings, only to later complain about it. Don't be a Karen. This book contains discussion of virus outbreak, mental health issues, dubious and non-consensual sexual acts between a 17-year-old and her 21-year-old guardian. Non-consent differs from dubious. No physical or verbal consent is provided during the act. Please don't read if it triggers you.



**This box set includes bonus content. All chapters are edited for a smoother flow into the added dialogues to optimize reader enjoyment and for a better transition into the bonus scenes. As a result, the box set varies from the individual books, which are still available in their original formats.



Raven

I FELT MILO'S EYES ON ME BEFORE I SAW HIM. I GLANCED OUT THE FLOOR-to-ceiling window of the living room. There he was—all six feet of him—

standing outside the beautiful Upper West Side brownstone, his gaze transfixed on me.

I knew this day would come, but that didn't make it easier.

Milo grinned and strutted lazily to the front door. Even through the window, I concluded his shoulders to be broader than I remembered, indicative of a strict gym routine. He dressed well, his defined body outlined through the thin material of his white shirt. Experience told me his clothes were expensive. His black suit hugged him in all the right places and the jacket was left unbuttoned without a tie. Milo had an air about him. One that screamed, I barely put effort into looking good. When we were younger, my friends swooned over his athletic physique, rigid jawline, dark brown hair, and green eyes. I'd hoped he aged horribly into his twenties—maybe developed a bald spot or became fat—but no such luck.

The asshole was still the epitome of male beauty. I bet Milo's popularity with the female demographic hadn't changed, and they probably fell at his feet.

However, his charms didn't work on me because I knew better. Milo might be blessed with an angel's face, but he was evil incarnate and had made my life dark. He was Lucifer, the Devil, disguised beautifully to trick mortal women.

He was my worst nightmare.

My mental preparations weren't enough to overcome the frozen panic engulfing me as Milo opened the front door. My first instinct was to run upstairs and lock myself in my childhood bedroom. The second was to take off my red bottoms and hit his cocky face with the pencil-sharp heel. Maybe it would puncture one of his eyes, and he'd be scarred like he had scarred me. The thought brought a smile to my face, but I suppressed it. Instead, I focused on the game plan to freeze him and act nonchalantly.

Apathy wounded him more than rage or sorrow. Anger, fear, trepidation, and tears were the result of some form of emotion. He got off on my feelings. It was my apathy that he couldn't control or tolerate. I planned to

throw him off by consistently dismissing him. He could exist or not exist. He was part of the environment, like the furniture. It wasn't the most creative game plan, but it was the best I could do without telling Reid or our parents about what he'd done. That would cost me more than I could bear.

With my thoughts rampant, I lost sight of the fact that the Devil had flung open the door and was headed toward me. He stopped to look at me with an unreadable expression. I finished my last day at work and was in a black cocktail dress paired with nude pumps. The dress was conservative with a jacket, but since I took off the coat, the halter exposed more skin than I'd planned to show.

Milo continued to stare at me for what seemed like an eternity. The intensity in his gaze made the most confident people squirm. However, I glared back, hoping to give nothing away.

"Rave."

I didn't respond, leveling him with my best, Oh, it's you, expression. But when he started toward me, my body tensed, followed by trembling.

"How have you been?" he asked warmly as if we were old talking pals.

My mind went blank when he stood close enough for his familiar musky scent to waft into my nostrils. The smell used to bring me comfort. Now, it was a reminder of my horrors. Instead of answering, I tried to throw him off.

"Milo," I said coolly. "Come in. Would you like a drink?"

"You're inviting me to my own home and offering me a drink? Shouldn't I be the one offering you a drink?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Okay. Get me a drink."

He grinned at my attempt to turn the tables. I wanted to slap the cocky smile off his face. Instead, I gave him my drink order.

"I'll take a dry martini with orange bitters and a lemon twist. Olives will do if you don't have lemons. I prefer it in a chilled glass. You can probably

chill the glass in the ice bucket.”

I held my facial expression as he gave me another amused look. Milo was polite and would comply with playing host. I was never going to make that motherfucker a drink. This was a power struggle, and I wanted him to cater to me.

Milo shrugged off his jacket and draped it over the back of a living room chair. His body appeared more muscular than my initial assumption, reminding me how quickly he could overcome me.

He waved out an arm, motioning toward the kitchen. “After you.”

We walked to the kitchen island with a built-in liquor shelf. I kept a safe distance, not daring to underestimate the risks of my predicament. The pepper spray in my pocket was a solemn reminder that I was no longer trusting or naive. Staying at this house was far from ideal. It was my last resort.

Rent in New York City was absurd, even for the shitty basement I shared with two girls. I had a full-time, unpaid internship Monday through Friday and worked as a bartender after work and on weekends. I was exhausted from the seventy-hour work week and could barely scrape enough cash for food and rent. Nonetheless, I was committed to the schedule to avoid returning to this hell hole. For a little while, the plan had worked.

However, I hadn’t accounted for a fucking pandemic.

A few months ago, we heard an inkling of coronavirus discovered in the Wuhan district of China. At the time, it seemed like a problem for the other side of the globe. The virus was all over the world in less than a few months. The government set up protocols such as social distancing, shutdowns, and staying indoors. The company where I did my internship closed until further notice, and a few days ago, the part-time servers were laid off at my second job.

Reid and the rest of my family twisted my arm into moving back to the Sinclair home. Free food and accommodation were readily available at my

childhood home. What excuse could I possibly provide to decline their reasonable request?

I couldn't find a suitable reason, and instead, took comfort in the fact the whole family would be staying here, too, not that their presence ever stopped Milo.

Milo continued to watch me as he searched the liquor shelf, settling on a bottle of red wine. He poured two glasses.

"We don't have any gin for the martini." He shrugged. "I hope you still like Malbec."

"That's fine." I loved Malbec, but he did have gin since Reid stocked ingredients for martinis. I spat out a complicated drink order, but Milo was making it clear he wouldn't bend over backward for me. I bit the inside of my cheek and accepted the glass of wine with grace.

I had to establish a polite, ladylike, and aloof nature to create distance between us. Familiarity bred contempt. If I acted childish or chided him like a close friend, he wouldn't take me seriously.

With my intentions on guard, I took a sip of my wine.

"When did you get back to New York?" His eyes remained glued to mine.

"A week ago," I lied smoothly. I'd been dodging him for years. If he found out I had been living in New York for months, it'd start an argument.

"Are you working?"

"I'm doing an internship at Karen's company." I cleared my throat, uncomfortable.

"What about Paris? And your mom?"

"It didn't work out."

"And now you plan to branch out on your own?"

I nodded, taking another sip of wine.

“I’m guessing it’s a non-paying internship since Karen thinks gracing interns with her presence is the same as paying them an actual salary.”

I nodded again.

Realization dawned on him as he continued, “With the pandemic, you can’t work a part-time job. So, you’ll stay here. We’re all camping out here as well.”

I didn’t respond. I didn’t have to. Milo had phrased a statement about me staying here instead of asking me.

Reid told me about Milo’s business and its enormous success. Milo created an app when he was in college. It landed him on Forbes’ 30 Under 30 brightest entrepreneur list. He often traveled for work. Whenever he returned to New York, he stayed at his parents’ brownstone rather than his condo in Soho. He had always preferred to be around family, so I wasn’t surprised he chose to quarantine at the brownstone.

It wasn’t enough for Milo to be rich and handsome; he was also the prodigal son. He’d rather hang out with family than party like a regular twenty-five-year-old on the prowl. Both of our families loved him for it. Everyone loved him. Everyone but me because I knew better.

I shook away the thought. This run-in had served its purpose. Milo was aware of my return. Years had passed since I last saw him. I had to believe he had grown up and become a better man. Everything would be different this time around. It had to be for my sanity.

With that resolution, I made up my mind to leave him be. I’d avoid being alone with Milo and hide until Reid returned from campus.

“I’m glad that’s settled. I wish I could stay and catch up, but I have to unpack. Thank you for the drink.” My words came out coherently, even as my body shook, legs ready to give out.

Milo eyed me, taking a long sip of his wine.

I didn’t wait for a response. Placing my wine glass on the island, I turned on my heels. I walked toward the stairs without a backward glance. My goal

resided at the top of the stairs—my room—my sweet escape from him. I even installed a lock in case he got any funny ideas in the middle of the night.

A gust of air moved behind me as I took the stairs. Before I could turn to inspect, two freakishly strong hands wrapped around my waist and hoisted me up. It happened so quickly I didn't have the chance to scream. The shock subsided when it registered that Milo had followed me and firmly held my back to his front. I found my voice and screamed bloody murder. Unfortunately, Milo was fast. When my wailing subsided, we reached the top of the stairs.

“You think you can waltz in here after four years and give me the fucking cold shoulder?” Milo growled as he walked with me in his arms. “You didn't think I knew you moved back months ago and had been avoiding me. What the fuck, Raven!”

I froze. Of course, he knew I had moved back. He played along to fuck with me, to humor me into thinking I was in control, so he could catch me off guard to get what he wanted.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I yelled back. “I swear to God, if you so much as touch me, I'll go to the police. I'll tell our families. I'll tell everybody. I'm not letting you get away with this shit anymore.”

“Do it.”

“What?”

“Do. It. Do all of those things. When will you understand? I don't fucking care.”

Pure shock took me over. He wanted me to go to the police and embarrass our families.

Before I could respond, he opened the door to his room. He walked us inside as I struggled against him. I froze upon hearing the familiar snick of the lock. The door was sealed, and so was my fate.

I reached for my pocket, but the pepper spray wasn't there. Fuck. It must have dropped while he was manhandling me. I tried the last-ditch effort of appealing to his rational side.

"Milo, listen to me. You have to stop. Reid is about to come home. He's going to hear me scream. He might be your brother, but he's my best friend. You know he'll kill you if he finds you forcing yourself on me. Your relationship will be—"

He tossed me onto the familiar bed and covered my body with his, keeping me in place.

I hit him with my hands, legs, elbows, and anything that might make contact. I screamed and pushed against his chest and tried to kick him in the groin. I should've saved my breath. If possible, Milo was stronger than before. I couldn't move with his legs keeping me in place. He grabbed both of my wrists and pinned them on the mattress.

"Enough, Rave."

"Fuck off! You've no right to do this to me."

"No right? I'm the only one with the right." He leaned down, lips grazing my ear. "You are mine. Or did you forget?"

"I'm not yours. I'll never be yours. Forcing me doesn't make me yours."

"You're lying to yourself, just like you lied about Reid coming home. You don't think I know when he is coming home? If you'd stop lying to yourself and to me, we wouldn't be here."

"Fuck you!"

He crushed his lips to mine and nipped at my bottom lip until I parted them. His tongue aggressively explored my mouth, leaving no space to reject it. I could barely breathe. I moved my head, but the firm hand on my nape kept me caged. He pulled my dress to my waist, yanking down my thong.

This can't be happening.

“Milo, listen to me. I’ve known you my whole life. You’re a good man. You know this is wrong. Please don’t do this.” There had to be something good left inside of him, some semblance of the man I once knew.

He put his forehead on mine and groaned, “Rave, I’ve thought about you every single day, every hour, every fucking second. I can’t stop now. Not when you’re here in front of me.”

“Please just stop, and I’ll forget this happened.”

Milo glared at me. “You will never forget this happened, and you’ll never forget me. I won’t let you.”

He trailed kisses along my neck and my jaw. “Fuck, I missed you. I missed you so fucking much. You don’t know how—” His voice trembled with effort before his lips collided against mine.

Shaking with anger, I tried to bite anything within the vicinity—his nose, lips, ears. His head fell back with a curse when I made contact.

“Stop it unless you want to get punished.”

“Get off me. Get off me, or I’ll do it again.”

Milo didn’t bother responding and pretended as if I weren’t there. I moved my limbs to attack him. He must’ve known I wouldn’t go down without a fight or lie here and take it. Milo collected my wrists with one large hand. He pinned them to my stomach and dropped toward my lower body.

Before I could determine the intent, his tongue was on my sex. He knew of my most sensitive spots and found my clit with ease. His free hand traveled south, slipping two fingers inside me. Boxed in, I willed my body not to respond to his tongue. I already knew it to be useless. He was familiar with every spot on my sex and could make me come with a blindfold on.

This time was no different. Within minutes, I arched my back and clenched, cognizant of what was about to happen. Milo released my wrists as they no longer needed to be held prisoner. I was now chasing this high on my own.

I heard the opening of his zipper as my eyes fluttered shut. Unable to hold back, I cried, “Oh, God.”

My mouth remained open as the orgasm took over. Milo swapped the tongue on my clit with his fingers before switching again with the head of his cock. The change between the three happened so fast that I didn’t feel void of a sensation between the transitions. Milo prolonged my orgasm by rubbing his head against the same spot for an unbearable moment. My back remained arched, fisting my hands into the bedsheets. My voice was stifled, unable to scream as his dick stretched me.

Milo entered me slowly—too slowly—shaking for control. He roared as he slammed inside me. “Holy shit, baby. Fuck!”

He stilled, panting heavily and stroking my hair. The intimacy was unbearable. He found a slow rhythm as if testing the water while covering my neck with soft kisses.

“Fuck, baby. I missed you. I missed you so damn much. You’re better than I remember. You are fucking perfect.”

Milo sped up, thrusting and rotating his hips. I could barely catch my breath, but I refused to make more sounds that might make him happy. I lay still with a blank stare, waiting for him to finish. This bothered him more than anything. While I had no control over this situation, I could control this little emotion. Apathy was my ultimate form of defiance against him.

I could feel his anger pulsing through his body. A look of determination followed it. He nibbled at my bottom lip, then dropped his head to suck on my neck, twirling his tongue around a sensitive spot. It was tough, but I refused to give him another inch. The fucker forced himself on me and passed off orgasm as consent. I refused to provide him with more satisfaction. Fuck him.

As my resolve grew, so did his. He slowed the thrusts and dropped his head to lick my breasts. My dress was hiked to my waist. Instead of pulling the dress off entirely, he pulled down the top, bunching the outfit around my

midsection. He grabbed my bra and yanked one of the cups to reveal my breast. His tongue swiped over my nipple before taking it between his teeth.

I didn't look down but felt his eyes on me, waiting for a reaction. I stared at the ceiling though my insides were frozen. A bad feeling was festering inside me.

There was an accident during one of our intimate times. Milo was fucking me and flicking my right nipple with his tongue. He had clamped down with his teeth right as I squeezed him. It surprised him, and he thrust up. His body shot forward with my nipple between his teeth. To say it was painful was putting it mildly.

From what I understood of this psychopath, his fixation came from my rejection. He wanted me to crave him. Being the perfect narcissist, Milo wanted me to like his physical touch. So, he only did things that got me off.

Following the incident, I recoiled from sex for a few days. I wouldn't get aroused no matter how hard he tried, and Milo would never allow that. Afterward, he only ever sucked gently or licked my nipples. He never used his teeth.

Until now. Now his teeth were clamping down, holding me at mercy. Panic flared at the memory of the traumatizing pain. I hated it, and he was doing it to punish me for my defiance.

The slow fucking sped up with each thrust. We were playing a game of chicken to see who'd fold first. He wanted an expression. He could deal with anger or lust, but he couldn't deal with nothingness.

I didn't want to risk the possibility of a brutal thrust while he clamped down on my nipple. If I gave him something, he'd stop. I also knew he'd hate to risk my body recoiling the next time he touched me. I shuddered at the thought of a next time. All the same, I called his bluff and remained expressionless.

Without provocation, Milo suddenly changed his mind about this mind fuck game. He licked my nipple and flicked it instead. When he swiped his tongue upward, I let go of the breath I didn't realize holding.

He sucked on my neck, calming my trepidation. I felt my taut muscles relax, grateful to be rid of the threat and the fear to come with it. Milo pounded into me, and my body jerked from impact. His dick rubbed against my sensitive clit, the friction increasing with each thrust. Despite myself, I arched my back and moaned as another orgasm took hold.

“That’s it, baby. Come with me.”

My eyes flew open upon realizing what had happened. The fake-me-out nipple clamp was a distraction. I was distracted with relief when Milo didn’t bite down, involuntarily giving him the expression he truly desired—my submission.

I didn’t have to look at him to know he was wearing a smirk. With nothing else to prove, Milo pounded harder until climaxing inside me.

Afterward, he kissed my cheek and neck, looking content as hell.

“That was amazing,” he murmured. “I knew you’d remember. Your body always remembers that you are mine. You’ll always be mine.” Milo buried his head into my neck as I turned away.

CHAPTER I

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NINE YEARS AGO - AUGUST 2011



Milo

I WIPED THE KITCHEN COUNTER LITTERED WITH FOOD CRUMBS. I SHOULD'VE known better when Mom decided to make breakfast. She was high on life earlier today, cooking and singing, and made a massive mess in the kitchen.

After breakfast, she crashed from the high and retreated to her room. Reid and Mia had no clue of what had happened or why her door was locked once more.

I didn't want to ruin one of the few good days they'd had with her in weeks, and I decided to clean up the mess before taking the runts to see Uncle John. It was one of our family traditions—one outing per weekend, no matter how small.

During the weekdays, Reid and Mia were in school. They didn't notice Mom locked away in her room for hours. On the weekends, they were around for far too long. I distracted them with made-up activities as if it were normal for a sixteen-year-old to be in charge of his twelve-year-old brother and eight-year-old sister.

I finished cleaning as Mia and Reid descended the stairs. Mia almost lost her footing at the bottom. I lifted her before she could fall, smiling as I

swung her around. Mia squealed and fell into a fit of giggles as I put her down.

Reid and Mia tugged at their socks and shoes, ready to leave the house. I'd barely done the laces on my combat boots when Reid opened the front door, practically flying outside.

I smirked. He couldn't wait to see Raven, his best friend. Today was the day Raven and Uncle John officially moved next door. We were going over to serve as their welcome wagon.

Though we called him uncle, we weren't related. Uncle John was Dad's best friend, although they considered each other brothers. Uncle John and Dad grew up in a small southern town in Virginia. Their families were devout Christians, and their friendship solidified through religion and the church community. Throughout their lives, they tried to instill the same values in us. It didn't stick.

After high school, Uncle John and Dad went to the same college. They also applied to the same medical schools, but it didn't work out. Dad ended up in New York, while Uncle John ended up in Boston.

I was three years old when Uncle John got married. Within the year, they had a baby girl, Raven. My parents had Reid the same year. Reid and Raven were born on the same day, only an hour apart. Naturally, they struck up a lifelong friendship. Reid and Raven were inseparable growing up. Every time Dad visited Uncle John in Boston, Reid tagged along.

When I was younger, I used to visit them, too. But the last time I went to Boston was eight years ago. That's when Mom got sick, and life went to shit.

Mia was born when I was eight. Mom started having mood swings—crazy highs and lows. Initially, they chalked it up to postpartum depression. She was later diagnosed with depression. Finally, it was anxiety and depression. The opinions had been many, and the drugs and therapy treatments had been even more. Lately, she hung out in her room, coming out on select days when she felt well enough.

Our lives took a hit after Mom's unsuspecting disorder crept up, disrupting life as we knew it. She became oblivious to her surroundings, drowning in self-pity. Her bedroom turned into her solace while we became strangers to her. She wasn't abusive. Severe neglect was the best description of her relationship with her family.

When Mia was young, I once came home and found her crying her little lungs out. She was alone in her crib, her diaper hadn't been changed, and she possibly hadn't been fed in hours. I quickly realized it was dangerous to leave Mia in Mom's care and convinced Dad to hire a part-time nanny. Later, I started helping with Mia after school.

After Mia was old enough, I found a reputable daycare for her. Nonetheless, Mom regularly forgot to pick her up. Once more, I had Dad hire a nanny. It was alright for a while, but Mia rebelled against nannies with a vengeance after turning four. She was attached to me and would throw a fit if strangers came near her. It was World War III trying to part ways during school drop-offs. It was a lot of pressure for a thirteen-year-old to be in charge of his five-year-old sister.

Dad tried his best to help, but he worked long hours at the hospital, and Mia never developed an attachment to him. He didn't have a choice. Mom lost her job after missing one too many days. Dad picked up extra moonlighting shifts to carry on the lifestyle we'd grown accustomed to over the years.

Initially, Dad tried to make it work by renting out part of our home to compensate for the loss of a second income. The previous owners had customized our house into a duplex style. The downstairs had its own entrance, kitchen, bedrooms, and living room—a separate apartment. We rented it out, but after one freak tenant to the next bad one, we realized it wasn't sustainable for a family of five to rent out a part of their home. The alternate was cutting down our semi-luxurious lifestyle.

We weren't rich, but we did have a brownstone on the Upper West Side. The three of us attended private school, and Dad started trust funds for us when we were young. We weren't made of money, but we were comfortable.

Financial stability was something Dad never had while growing up. He didn't want us to be deprived of opportunities because of money. He wanted us to have the best opportunities, the ones New York City public schools wouldn't be able to provide, but private schools and trust funds would.

Dad worked extra moonlighting shifts on his off days. Watching his tired eyes and dark circles from lack of sleep was difficult. I couldn't let Dad drown, so I stepped up to the plate. I helped around the house and never complained. He never realized how the burden of raising my siblings at a young age affected me. As far as Dad was concerned, they were cared for at school all day, followed by various after-school activities. It didn't cross his mind to worry about who picked Mia up after school, if their homework was done, if they were disciplined for poor behavior, if their lunches were packed, or what they ate for dinner.

He was the household's primary breadwinner and clueless about how children were raised. That used to be Mom's job. He never questioned how those duties were fulfilled with Mom's diagnosis and Mia's aversion to nannies. It was a trigger for Mia. She assumed if the nanny was here, then I'd leave her.

The drastic change in role during my childhood didn't leave time for travel. I hadn't been to Boston since I was eight. Raven was only four the last time I saw her. I wondered if she still had a sweet tooth. She used to steal candy and all kinds of sweets from the kitchen, hiding them in her room.

While I hadn't seen Raven in years, I saw Uncle John frequently during his visits to New York. Uncle John was my hero and my biggest cheerleader. He didn't judge people for their shortcomings and never passed unkind opinions. Being a man of faith, he told me he had demons, too. If he were to succumb to them, he hoped someone would be kind enough to help him without judgment. Even in his professional life, he was a hero and big on giving back to the community. Before getting married, he worked for Doctors Without Borders and was a gem of a human being.

While he did reserve his judgment about Mom, he understood the toll it took on me. He invited Reid and Mia to visit Boston for the last few summer vacations, giving me a much-needed break to be a typical teenager.

I could have friends over, go to parties, have sex—the usual teenage shit. Mia loved Raven and didn't throw tantrums despite being away from me.

For the last eight years, Uncle John had been my constant salvation. Now, I had to be his. His wife, Theresa, recently left him and his thirteen-year-old daughter. Uncle John was heartbroken.

When Uncle John married Theresa Beckett, she was a runway model and aspiring fashion designer. Uncle John quickly became obsessed with her. She didn't feel the same, but her fashion design career never took off, and she was too old to keep modeling. The prospect of settling down with a rich, semi-handsome doctor was suddenly not so horrendous.

She was still on the fence about marrying Uncle John until she got pregnant with Raven. Our parents wouldn't admit to this story, but I'd heard it through enough family friends to know it was true. Theresa only agreed to marry Uncle John because she was pregnant. Uncle John didn't want kids, but if it meant getting to marry the woman of his dreams, he didn't seem to mind. Theresa put her ambitions on hold and pursued the role of a mother and wife instead. She sketched designs as a hobby and was content for a while. They both were.

Things changed drastically in their quiet lives after one of Theresa's designs caught the eye of another successful designer. She was offered a job in Europe, entailing significant travel between Milan and Paris. When it came down to choosing between her dream job and marriage, she chose the job. It wasn't feasible to take along a thirteen-year-old when her job required constant travel and an inconsistent schedule. So, she left them both behind.

Uncle John begged her and even went to Europe to win her back. However, Theresa was determined. Life as a wife and mother wasn't for her, and he had been a mess since.

My father suggested they move to New York City to be closer to us. At a time like this, you needed to be with family. But I suspected the real reason was that Uncle John was a terrible father. Although he was my role model, he was better as the fun uncle. He never wanted children and now had no

idea what to do with Raven. Dad thought we could keep an eye out for one another while ensuring Uncle John didn't go off the deep end.

The move was surprisingly easy. Uncle John had a license to practice in New York, and Dad hooked him up with an interview at his hospital. There was also a brownstone up for rent a couple of houses down from us. Within a few weeks, they were able to make the shift. Hence, here we stood in front of their brownstone, ready to welcome them with open arms and hearts.

Reid and Mia sprung forward as the door flew open. We piled in, and soon hugs were exchanged. I grabbed Uncle John into a bear hug, noticing the deep-set dark bags under his eyes.

As I released him, I caught sight of the darkest shade of jet-black hair flying everywhere. I had barely grasped myself when a pair of hazel eyes stared at me as if peeking inside my soul and pulling it out of my body. It was intense, and I glared the orbs down, but they didn't waver. Before I could utter a word, two tiny arms flung around my neck, pulling me into a tight hug.

Vanilla. It was the first thing to register, the smell of warm vanilla, maybe mixed with a hint of lavender. The scent was intoxicating.

"Milo! I'm Raven. I know we met when I was younger, but since one of us was going through cognitive development, I think it's only fair that we consider this our first meeting. I want to officially introduce myself."

I blinked. There was no way this was Raven. She didn't look thirteen. She looked fifteen, possibly sixteen. I racked my brain for photos I'd seen in Reid's room. He must've put up pictures from a long time ago. She didn't look like this in those photos because this I would remember. She was thirteen?

Raven pulled back from the hug. I couldn't utter a response to her eloquent introduction. It was embarrassing to be nervous, trying to come up with a witty response. That was until I noticed what she was holding. In her right hand was a half-opened Snickers bar. I couldn't gather my thoughts and

burst out laughing. She followed my gaze to the candy bar and joined in as if it were normal for us to share a private joke. She was fucking adorable.

Finally, I stuck out my hand. “Hello, Raven. It’s nice to meet you, post-cognitive development.”

She laughed again and brushed off my hand to take me into another hug. I was surprised by her affection and warmth. She might be too sweet and innocent for New York. This city was going to chew her up and spit her back out.

Raven linked one arm with mine and another with Mia’s. She had become family to Reid and Mia but didn’t let me feel left out of their exclusive circle. She led us inside and showed us around their new home. Raven excitedly spoke about their move, the furniture they ordered, her new room, and everything under the sun.

Uncle John remained quiet. He interjected here and there, barely responding to my attempts at a polite conversation. Finally, he excused himself, something about catching up with work.

My gaze followed his retreating body. I knew the signs of depression a little too well. I hoped Uncle John realized he had someone depending on him and snapped out of it. He had seen me suffer due to a depressed parent. Unfortunately, it wasn’t a luxury a parent could afford, especially a single parent.

When I focused back on the scene, I found Raven setting up the game console. Mia and Reid were busy putting together a model train set, a gift from Raven.

I sat next to Raven. “What are you playing?”

“Mario Kart. Want to play?”

I grabbed the second controller, and we set up our characters. Pretty soon, she was kicking my ass and smack-talking with her smart-ass mouth. I would be annoyed if I wasn’t busy laughing. I couldn’t remember the last time I laughed.

After a couple of hours, I forfeited. “Are you guys hungry?”

All three of them grunted, busy with a movie they had put on. I called our favorite delivery place and searched for Uncle John. I hadn’t heard a peep from him all night. I looked everywhere, but he was nowhere to be found.

Did he leave? He didn’t say a word to his daughter or me. Was this a regular occurrence?

I found Raven in the next room, setting the table. She gave me a big smile when I entered the room. “Hi.”

“Did you see your dad leave?”

She shrugged.

I reminded myself of Uncle John’s words about not judging others. This was none of my business, but curiosity got the better of me. “Do you know where he went?”

“No. He sometimes needs to get away to clear his head.”

“And he doesn’t tell you where he goes?”

Another shake of her head.

“Does he stay out all night?” I pressed.

“Sometimes. He is going through a lot,” Raven said casually.

I was stumped. Raven was also going through a lot. She was only a kid, and her mother left her. They only moved in today. How could her father leave her in a new house in a new city without telling her? How could she be so cavalier about this?

Sure, I dealt with my share of parent drama, but I had the good sense of being angry at them. Raven didn’t give anything away with her expression. I didn’t know if this made her angry or sad. She was blank.

I didn’t voice more concerns. This was none of my business, and I had enough on my plate.

Once the delivery arrived, Raven and I set up the food. Reid and Mia piled into the dining room and barely used utensils, devouring everything in front of them. Raven laughed alongside me at their savagery and had the sense to eat like a normal human being.

After dinner, we stuck around for a bit longer. I waited, hoping for Uncle John to return. As the night progressed, it became clear that he wasn't coming back. I told Raven to pack a bag and stay the night at our place.

"Oh no, that's okay." Raven appeared irritated by my suggestion. I didn't understand this girl.

"Please, Rave," Mia chimed in. "Please come home with us. Let's have a slumber party. Pretty please."

"Really, guys. I can't. I have a tour scheduled at the school tomorrow. Plus, I have to unpack the remaining boxes."

"Jesus, Rave. Just come back with us. There is no one here," Reid echoed my sentiment.

Raven averted her gaze. "You guys are making a big deal out of nothing. Dad probably got called into work for an emergency. I'm sure he'll be back any second. I'm fine."

It hit me, then. Pride. We caught Raven at a vulnerable moment, one that's embarrassing for her. She was alone, but she didn't want us to save her like a stray cat we were taking home. We had to word it differently.

"Okay, Raven," I said casually. "No worries. I know you have a lot to do. If you can't stay the night, come by for cake. We have a whole chocolate fudge cake in the fridge. I was going to bribe these two with a slice in exchange for cleaning their rooms." I hoped for her to take the bait.

Raven smiled at me with another unfathomable expression. I didn't know if she was excited about the cake or if she realized my ruse to let her save face. Or maybe she was relieved about not being left alone in this big house.

"Nom, nom, nom. Cake! I can't say no to that. Let's go."

I grinned as the three of them headed out. I shut the front door but couldn't help my disappointment. Uncle John, my savior, was no more the hero of this story than my mother.

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CHAPTER 2

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JUNE 2012



Milo

“GO UPSTAIRS!” I USED MY STERN VOICE, HOPING IT REFLECTED MY SERIOUS tone. I seldom went out on the weekends. Dad’s hospital shifts were seven on and five off. This meant he worked twelve hours a day, seven days straight. Then he had five days off.

He’d often moonlight and pick up extra shifts during his days off, so I rarely left the house at night. Dad felt terrible about me missing the usual high school stuff, birthdays, homecomings, hanging out with friends. However, I couldn’t leave Mia home alone. I used to have the nanny stay over on the weekends, but Mia’s tantrums put a stop to it.

Instead, Dad let me use the split-level apartment to throw house parties. As long as I was responsible, he never gave me a hard time about it. These parties had gained a reputation, attracting even college students. The downstairs was soundproof. It was large, with a cool retro vibe and a never-ending supply of liquor. Our housekeeper, Maria, came by once a week. Dad gave her a stipend for grocery shopping. One of the requirements was to ensure the liquor cabinets were full. The upstairs liquor cabinet had a lock, so Maria stocked it with expensive stuff. The downstairs bar got the

cheap shit. No one at these parties cared, though, as long as it was free. Pair alcohol with absentee parents, turning this house into a party sanctuary.

I scheduled these parties after Mia's bedtime and put two strict rules in place—don't go upstairs and follow my rules regarding my family, which included not allowing Reid or Mia into these parties.

That's why I was annoyed Reid was standing here, demanding entry. I made sure to tuck Mia in before everyone came over. When I checked on Reid, he was also getting ready for bed.

I wanted to throw back a few drinks and relax with people my age. I wasn't exposing my little brother to that. I'm aware kids in New York start drinking at a young age. Hell, I started drinking at his age. But guess what? I was a parent to Reid and Mia, and parents were hypocrites. They didn't want you to make the same mistakes as they did.

Plus, when I was his age, I never put myself in unnecessarily risky situations because my family relied on me. I drank, I had sex, but safety was my number one concern. I was never out of control and did everything in moderation.

I didn't see the same maturity in Reid. I often saw it in Raven, though. I trusted her. I trusted her more than the adults in our lives because she thought past herself. She reflected on how her behavior might affect her loved ones and acted accordingly. Reid hadn't developed the same state of mind. He might in a couple of years, and when he did, I'd rather he drank under my supervision. I wouldn't deny him entrance to these parties forever, but I would deny it tonight.

"The answer is hell no," I snarled. "Go upstairs."

"You are such a fucking hypocrite."

"Reid, what the hell is the matter with you? You're too young for this shit."

"You were my age when you started drinking. You're living it up here and keeping us locked upstairs. You leave us with her while you screw around. Fuck you, Milo! Go choke on a dick." Reid stomped upstairs.

His comments hit home, and I felt like a piece of shit. I was fucking up with him. I could feel it.

I used to think Dad left me with her every time he walked out of the house. I understood now that money didn't grow on trees. Dad worked to provide for us, send us to private schools, and secure us a future. I hoped Reid came to the same conclusion about me. Dad was doing his best, and I was doing my best. Parents weren't perfect, and being a parent didn't absolve you of your flaws.

Suddenly, my chest squeezed, and I took shallow breaths to alleviate it. How could a stupid fight with Reid cut me so deep?

Having lost my energy to entertain, I walked outside for fresh air. Reaching the sidewalk, I spied a mass of long jet-black hair.

Raven.

She was sitting on the steps outside her brownstone. The sight calmed me, and my chest didn't feel hollow anymore. Over the past year, Raven became a part of our family. She was young but shockingly mature. At this point, I considered her a good friend of mine. She was poised, classy, and well put together—the kind of person who had a calming effect on everyone. Not to mention, she was incredibly beautiful.

I frequently reminded myself not to think shit like that. I was seventeen—a few months shy of eighteen—and about to start college. She was fourteen and about to enter her freshman year of high school. Plus, she was Reid's best friend. I forced myself not to look deeply into her physical beauty, which was fine because the best part about her was her words. She was articulate yet humorous and exactly what I needed.

“Hi, Rave.”

Raven spotted me and gave me her megawatt smile. Despite how much I chided myself, my heart stopped.

“Hey, there. Did the party end early?”

“Nah, it's still going on. What are you doing outside by yourself?”

“Just needed some air.”

I feared it meant Uncle John hadn't come home, and Raven was waiting for him. Again. I was shocked Raven still craved his love. He had treated his only daughter like dirt since her mother left. Love had made a monster out of Uncle John, but not Raven. She spoke to her mother frequently over the phone and told me she was happy Theresa pursued her dreams. It made me shake my head at Raven.

The more understanding Raven acted about her mother's decision, the more Theresa drowned in guilt and showered her daughter with gifts. Once a month, Raven now received shipments of designer clothing and shoes. The downside of the gifts was that they made a fourteen-year-old Raven resemble an eighteen-year-old model. Furthermore, Theresa demanded photos of Raven in these outfits. Raven had nowhere to wear the clothes since her private school required uniforms. Her only opportunity was around us. Those outfits gave me mini heart attacks, further challenging my denial about Raven's physical beauty. Other men seemed to experience the same difficulty. More than once, Reid and I had threatened to murder men with leering eyes or groping hands.

I plopped next to Raven on the steps. She put her head on my shoulder like she often did and sat in comfortable silence for a few moments.

After a beat, I asked her the unsettling question. “When was the last time you saw Uncle John?”

Raven said nothing.

Another odd fact dawned on me. “Rave, why are the lights turned off inside your house?”

Still quiet.

“Rave—”

“Milo... don't.”

“Don't what?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I do worry about it.”

“It’s not a big deal. Dad made a mistake with the electricity bill. They shut it off.”

“What the hell! When did this happen?” I was furious, and she looked too fucking calm for my comfort.

“Milo, he’s going through something. It’s not that big of a deal. It’s been great weather lately. Not too hot or cold. If there was a time for Dad to slip up, thank God it was now.”

She smiled it off. Was she making light of this?

Raven wasn’t a pushover. She wouldn’t let anyone talk down to her. Reid, with his hot temper, was the only one to try. Raven dealt with him by saying something to the effect of: If you aren’t in the mindset to have a sensible conversation, I will excuse myself from this situation. Call me when you’re in control of your emotions, and we can have a mature discussion on how to resolve this argument.

Can you believe that came out of a fourteen-year-old’s mouth? It generally left Reid dumbstruck while I had to reel in my snort. So, why wasn’t she standing up to Uncle John?

I needed a reaction from her—a normal one to her abnormal father. I’d take anything other than the nonchalant act.

Raven was rational and all about seeing things from another perspective. I had to approach her with logic to get through. I never put in this much effort when speaking to females my age. Somehow this fourteen-year-old kept me on my toes.

“Okay. Let’s pass off the electric bill fiasco as a fluke. However, do you believe Uncle John is currently upholding his duties as your father? Yes, he is going through a tough time. He lost the only woman he loved, but he also has an obligation to you.”

I reminded myself she was a fourteen-year-old girl. This conversation might make her cry. On the other hand, if she were as mature as I pegged her to be, she'd reflect on my words and listen to my advice.

I continued, "We all go through tough times. It's part of life. It's okay to mourn a loss for a reasonable amount of time. But if it's at the expense of everything you value, when does it stop being a mourning period and turns into a lifestyle?" I paused, letting the words sink in. Raven didn't waiver, giving nothing away with her expression. "If he doesn't know his behavior is affecting you negatively, he won't change," I added softly.

Raven listened to my spiel without interrupting. When I was done, she spoke slowly, "He does know."

"He does?"

"The first time I approached him was when Mom left. He was reclusive and detached. I told him I needed him to step up as my father. He agreed, but it only lasted a week. It was like pulling teeth, and finally, he stopped trying. You can't force someone into things they aren't ready for. Our discussions only made him uncomfortable and embarrassed. And he stopped wanting to be around me. He was drowning in self-pity and couldn't face the disappointment in my eyes. That's why we decided to move to New York."

I was awed by the information. "I thought Uncle John moved because Dad asked him to."

"That was part of it. Once we moved here, I told him I needed him to do better. He tried his best. Then I caught him talking to Doctors Without Borders about a possible assignment. It became clear to me. He wants to get away. I'm a constant reminder of my mother, and my expectations aren't making it better. Each time he's unable to meet them, he sinks further into self-loathing. He has been leaving the house before I wake up and coming home after I go to sleep. The few times I see him, he looks guilty. He knows he's not doing right by me but doesn't have the willpower to change. So, he avoids me."

I opened my mouth to voice follow-up questions, but Raven spoke before I could ask.

“He still goes to work. He might avoid me or forget to pay the bills occasionally, but I have a roof over my head, and my best friends live next door. You guys are my family. Maybe Dad will later realize that he isn’t being fair to me. The more I discuss unwanted things with him, the more he pulls away. He doesn’t know how to be my father right now.”

How do you respond to this assessment? I was quiet for so long that Raven bumped my shoulder. “Lord help the boy you end up with, Rave. He’ll never win an argument. Most likely, he won’t even know he lost.”

Raven laughed and cocked her head as her dark hair spilled over her shoulders. I’d already decided how to move forward, but Raven wasn’t susceptible to ideas that wound her pride. Once more, I needed to use logic to make my case.

“Look, you made some good points. But by your admission, Uncle John is currently an unfit parent. He is lost and not mentally capable of his responsibilities.”

I paused to assess if Raven might voice an argument, but she didn’t.

“I also have an absentee parent, so Dad and I pick up the slack. There is no one here to do the same. While I believe in your abilities, I’m uncomfortable with the idea of you living in this house. What if an intruder breaks in? If your phone is dead from electricity loss, how do you plan to call for help?”

I allowed the terrifying idea to sink in. My stomach dropped at the thought.

“I’d like for you to move in with us temporarily. We love having you over. Reid has all but physically moved you in. He covered our guest room with your pictures and items. When guests stay over, Reid tells them they’re staying in Raven’s room, not the guest room.”

I casually leaned back on the step. I didn’t want to come off too strong, but my heart was beating fast over her rejecting my suggestion.

“This makes the most logical sense. You said that you live next door to your family. If the situation were reversed, you’d want us to come to stay with you, would you not? If we refuse, it’ll indicate we aren’t as close as we claim. If we are truly family, this is a no-brainer. If you’re still uncomfortable with the idea, see it as a trial run until your father sorts out his shit.”

I took a deep breath after the words I spewed out. I couldn’t imagine Raven staying in this house after everything she disclosed. She was coming back with me. It wasn’t a choice, though I patiently waited for her to respond.



Raven

Milo was waiting for a response, but he wasn’t waiting for me to say yes. This was happening no matter what. He was waiting for me to acknowledge it.

All of his protective instincts were out. I had seen this side of Milo before with Reid and Mia. When he was this determined, no one could stand in the way—not his parents, not the world, not God himself.

“Let’s go inside, so I can pack a bag,” I mumbled. “I’ll come back tomorrow for the rest. Is Reid still up?”

“He is, but I don’t think he’s talking to me right now.” Milo appeared exasperated at the mention of Reid’s name.

I felt for Milo. Lately, Reid had become exceedingly hot-headed. He was loyal and would lay down his life for his loved ones, but he was rough around the edges. When I lived in Boston, it seemed like Reid idolized Milo. Now that I lived closer, I realized Reid held an unfair amount of resentment toward Milo.

Milo was a pseudo-parental figure for Reid and Mia. Hell, he was a pseudo-parental figure for me, too. Mia and I idolized Milo. Reid worshiped him,

too, but he fought Milo at every turn, and I wasn't allowed to point it out or take Milo's side. Reid would get angry whenever I did. It was a sore topic, though Reid was the one at fault. Milo disciplined Reid for poor behavior, whereas Reid spewed hateful words at Milo. Reid didn't know how good he had it.

Milo and I walked inside the house. My phone was dead, so Milo used the light from his to find our way. I grabbed a backpack and packed some toiletries. I also packed a duffel bag with essentials for the night. When Milo wasn't looking, I pulled out a special box from under my bed and slipped it inside the duffel. It had my most prized possessions, and I'd rather take it with me.

I often stayed at the Sinclair home. Every time I did, Milo packed my lunch for school. As he did for Reid and Mia, he'd also include a handwritten note for me.

My heart melted the first time I saw a note.

An apple a day keeps the doctor away. Have an awesome day, Rave!

It was basic, encouraging me to take in my daily fruit intake. However, I had never gotten a lunch note before. My parents used to give me money for lunch.

So, I saved the note and prayed for another one. My wish was granted every time I stayed at the Sinclair home—more packed lunches with handwritten notes.

I'll keep packing this apple with your lunch until you eat it.

And he did.

Enjoy your lunch because Reid is cooking dinner tonight.

Reid loved to be creative in the kitchen. Every time a new season of MasterChef came out, he forced us to eat the home-cooked version of his latest creation. He was a terrible cook.

We're out of peanut butter. This is a jam & jam sandwich. Here is \$5 for a better lunch.

The jam and jam sandwich was delicious.

I never asked. Did your parents name you Raven because you have jet-black hair?

Yes, they did.

Why didn't they name you Snow White? You look more like Snow White than a raven.

My mother tried. Dad stopped her, thankfully.

I saved the notes in my special box. I had no handwritten memorabilia from my parents except for a few birthday cards. These personalized notes meant so much more than the generic words my parents wrote on birthday cards.

Sadly, Milo informed Reid that he'd no longer pack our lunches once we started high school. We'd be enrolled in the cafeteria lunch program instead. In the meantime, I collected as many lunch notes as possible.

Though I craved the little notes, I never overstayed my welcome. If I stayed at the Sinclair home two days in a row, I grudgingly scooted back to my empty house on the third day.

I hated it.

That was why I'd never forget this moment. I'd always be grateful for what Milo was doing for me and prayed to repay him someday. I secretly vowed to do anything to decrease Milo's stress. I refused to disappoint him, let him down, or make him regret letting me move in.

I repeated the mantra in my head as we stepped outside. I strapped on my backpack while Milo carried my duffle. Today, I was moving in with the Sinclairs, and for the first time in my life, I wasn't forced into someone's path. Finally, someone volunteered to care for me simply because they loved me.

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CHAPTER 3

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OCTOBER 2013



Raven

I HAD BEEN CLEANING TESSA'S ROOM FOR HOURS. THE ROOM WAS A disgusting mess. Trash and clothes were everywhere.

It had been over a year since I moved in with the Sinclairs. Shortly after moving in, Dad announced he was returning to Africa to work for Doctors Without Borders. He averted eye contact as he broke the news.

Before accepting the assignment, Dad spoke to Milo. He made Milo promise to look out for me as he did for Reid and Mia. He also asked Milo's parents—Reese and Tessa Sinclair—to become my legal guardians.

After Dad left, Uncle Reese received a job offer as a visiting specialist for a hospital in the Cayman Islands. The pay was significantly more for working half the hours. It was too good of an opportunity to pass up.

Uncle Reese spoke to Milo before making his decision. In the end, it was decided that Uncle Reese would take the position, and Milo would become my guardian since he was eighteen. Uncle Reese loved me like a daughter and knew it'd be useless to have Tessa become my guardian, especially when I needed parental representation at school.

So, here we were. Dad was away for Doctors Without Borders, Uncle Reese was away at Grand Cayman, and Tessa was here but barely present.

Once more, Milo was the only adult actively involved in our lives. He was officially my legal guardian. He was also the unofficial legal guardian for Reid and Mia, all the while attending Columbia University.

Uncle Reese wouldn't allow Milo to miss out on more college experiences than needed. Milo scheduled his classes over three days out of the week. He spent those three days at his dorm, living a regular college life. The other four days, he stayed with us.

The nanny stayed here on the days Milo was indisposed. It was hell on earth convincing Mia to let the nanny stay here, but she had a soft spot for me. She gave in once I used my persuasive skill sets.

I believed Milo was happy to have an escape. Looking at Tessa's room, I couldn't blame him. It was depressing. Tessa had become worse, staying in bed for days on end.

It made me feel guilty for forcing him into the role of my guardian. I had a happy home and life at Milo's expense. He was already responsible for Mia and Reid, and attending Columbia wasn't easy. He deserved to enjoy college, so I helped as much as possible.

I turned when I heard the door creak and found Reid's face peeking through it. Tessa was lying on the bed, facing away from him.

"How is it going in here?"

"Same old."

The room was looking better. I didn't divulge how bad it was because Reid felt easily irritated by Tessa. The last thing I wanted was to create conflict in the Sinclair home.

Milo, Mia, and Reid had become my constants. I needed them to be in harmony for my sanity. I shared a unique connection with each, and I loved them more than I loved myself.

My connection with Reid was a spiritual one. I couldn't explain it. He was my best friend, but he was also my soulmate. Not the romantic kind, but our souls were tethered to one another. We were born on the same day, an hour apart, and to parents who were also inseparable best friends. Our connection was cosmic.

When my mom left, Reid begged his dad to take him to Boston. When his dad couldn't get out of work, he convinced Milo to let him take the Amtrak alone. I didn't even ask.

When Reid realized Tessa was fucked in the head, he never explained himself to me. I could feel his mood shift, and I'd lean against him to communicate telepathically.

Do you want me here, or do you want to be alone?

He'd give me telepathic responses when he wanted to be comforted versus when he wanted to be left alone. No words needed to be exchanged between us. This was more powerful than romantic love. Romantic love was fleeting, but the love we shared was unparalleled. I could live without my parents, but I couldn't live a happy life without Reid. I'd be missing half my soul.

Reid stared at me, our telepathic connection kicking in. He was asking, Do you think she'll get up today?

It doesn't seem like it. I shook my head in my silent response.

Tessa's moods went up and down. There were days when she was lucid, but lately, she had been retreating. I'd bring her a sandwich and leave it on the nightstand, but the meals were often untouched. Occasionally, I could trick her into taking a shower. Today was one of the more challenging days.

Reid rolled his eyes. Years of resentment had severed their ties. As he was about to walk out, another head poked in. Mia.

Mia was my sunshine. When we were younger, she tagged along with Reid for his visits to Boston. She quickly became my sister, a little doll I loved and adored.

She was four years younger than us but refused to be treated as such. She made me put makeup on her and begged me to try on heels. She looked so darn cute, with her little feet barely filling my shoes. Growing up in a household with two boys, she was ecstatic when I moved in. She followed me around, asking me all sorts of girly questions. She was a force to be reckoned with. I could be in the worst mood, but she would gab relentlessly until I gave in and hugged the crap out of her. Mia's optimism made it bearable for cynics like me.

Tessa had struggled throughout Mia's life. At least Reid and Milo experienced Tessa's love before her mental illnesses took hold. Mia never had the opportunity.

Mia still loved Tessa fiercely. She was capable of unconditional love, one I craved. My relationship with my parents deteriorated so fast that I didn't have the chance to differentiate. Parents were supposed to love you unconditionally, but mine loved me with conditions.

But Mia loved with all her might. After Milo, she loved me the most in the world. Her face lit up every time I walked by, making my chest swell with pride. Pride over getting another human to look at me that way. It was the same way I looked at Milo—like he was the sun and the light at the end of my dark tunnel—my hero, my idol, my savior.

"Rave!" Mia whined. "Can we watch the movie now?"

"Yes, ma'am. Let's do it."

I stuffed the trash I collected in a black garbage bag. As I dragged the bag, Reid snatched it out of my hand and walked down the stairs to put the trash outside. It was such a Reid thing to do. Whenever Milo gave us chores, Reid found a way out of it or gave him a hard time. Wanting to keep the peace, I'd volunteer to take care of Reid's chores. However, he'd immediately step up to do his chores, along with mine. Reid acted difficult, but he was a marshmallow.

Reid was Milo's problem child. Maybe that's why Milo liked having me around. Reid's loyalty to me made life easier for Milo, and I was eager to

make life easier for Milo Sinclair.

Milo. Just thinking of him brought a smile to my face. He was coming home tonight from campus. It had been a few days, and I missed him like crazy.

Reid, Mia, and I sat on the couch, propping our feet on the coffee table. This was our typical movie night position. The coffee table was covered with take-out, popcorn, and candy. Milo disapproved of Mia eating candy in the evening, so I had to negotiate portion control with her. Mia didn't stand a chance at overeating anyway because I usually devoured the candy. If there were sweets in my vicinity, I had to stuff my face with them. Thank God I took dance classes. I'd be five hundred pounds otherwise.

We turned on the movie. Mia cuddled up to my side as Reid threw an arm around my shoulders. I leaned back with a candy bar. I loved our family traditions.

Many of my girlfriends also wished for my little family traditions and living arrangement, but for a different reason. Most of them swooned over Reid and Milo. Reid had joined Milo on his dedicated gym routine last summer. The girls had taken notice he'd gained twenty pounds of muscle within the year. Before we finished our freshman year of high school, Reid had only kissed one girl. Now, he had a rotation. They were eager to be my friend and to be on Reid's radar.

I found it amusing. Milo, not so much.

He was uncomfortable with Reid's newfound popularity. Milo suggested that Reid waited to have sex until he liked one girl enough to make safe choices. Reid was pissed at Milo for meddling and called him a hypocrite since Milo started having sex earlier than fifteen. Reid wasn't wrong in his assessment.

After turning fifteen, Milo allowed us to attend his infamous parties. He no longer wanted to keep fighting with Reid and trusted me to keep him in check. We discovered through the grapevines of these parties that Milo was thirteen or fourteen when he lost his virginity.

Milo explained he didn't have an active adult in his life while growing up, someone to give him better advice about sex. He didn't want Reid to make the same mistakes. It made sense to me, but Reid wasn't so understanding. That boy was always angry nowadays. Thank God he had a beautiful face to fall back on.

Both the Sinclair boys were easy on the eyes. Girls swooned over them, especially Milo. It was evident that Milo had an active sex life. I overheard girls at these parties discuss his 'lickable six-pack' and 'fuckable dick.'

Too. Much. Information.

Yes, Milo was good-looking. It wasn't about his sharp cheekbones, emerald-green eyes, strong set jaw, or his tall, dark hair and handsome build. It was Milo's aura. He was a good dresser and turned heads with how he carried himself. There had been times everyone would stop to stare when Milo walked into a room.

If I was objective, Milo was more than good-looking. But I never allowed myself to think past it. To me, both Milo and Reid were my brothers. The other girls didn't see it that way. Milo's groupies used to give me the stank eye. It took them months to realize I was equivalent to his little sister. Once they did, the girls wanted to be my friend, just like Reid's groupies. They bombarded me with questions about Milo, begging for information to give them an in. Many of them had slept with Milo, but they wanted girlfriend status and wondered how to make it happen.

I understood the appeal of wanting a deeper connection with Milo. I'd be the super-obsessed president if there were a Milo fan club. Even while growing up, Milo was my phantom superhero. Mia and Reid idolized him. My dad considered the Sinclairs lucky for their golden boy, Milo, an academically gifted teenager taking care of his family.

Since the night we met, Milo had taken care of me. He gave me a permanent home, a real family, and he was my third parent. Milo was the one to meet with my guidance counselor, attend the PTA meetings, sign permission slips, and write checks for field trips. He never treated it as an inconvenience. If he harbored resentment toward me, he never let it show.

Milo was the epitome of what was right. He was responsible, a good friend, a protector, and a self-sacrificing man of honor and brilliant. He was the perfect human being.

So, yes, to say I understood Milo's appeal was putting it mildly. I did understand the desire for an emotional connection with him; I just didn't get the appeal of a romantic one. I chased a different type of love from Milo. Every time I excelled in life, I made it a priority to tell him. I had an incessant need for his approval. My extreme idolization stemmed from my parental issues and the need for validation from an authority figure. I was self-aware enough to admit it.

Nonetheless, I didn't understand the romantic appeal. If you were searching for love, romantic love wasn't the way to go. The marriages in my immediate environment were toxic. However, the friendships in my life were indicative of true love. Other girls didn't believe my words and were convinced I secretly craved romance.

While not life-altering, I did have one romantic interest this past summer. It wasn't how these girls described their feelings for Milo, but it was good enough for me.

Reid had been bugging me to experiment. We did everything together and wanted to experience our first kisses by the end of freshman year. I settled on Asher Huntzberger for the purpose after meeting him at one of Milo's parties. Asher was a family friend of the Sinclairs. He attended college with Milo and had a quick wit about him. He was handsome with dark hair and sharp looks. When we met, Asher was Milo's age. I'd only turned fifteen, though everyone assumed I was seventeen due to the outfits my mother sent me. I never lied about my age, but Asher never asked, either. I figured out his age after Milo mentioned they were from the same year at Columbia.

Asher and I hit it off and made out discreetly throughout the summer. I never took it further than kissing, but Asher did ask me out a few times.

Milo was overprotective. Kissing was one thing, but if he found out I was dating a nineteen-year-old boy, he'd lose it. As far as I was concerned, kissing was an experiment. For all intents and purposes, it was a successful

exercise. Asher didn't pique my interest enough to pick a fight with Milo or to jeopardize the harmony I shared with the crazy Sinclairs.

The craziest of the Sinclairs, Mia, hopped out of our comfortable seating arrangement without warning. Surprised by her abrupt movement, I followed her gaze and spotted Milo walking toward our front door. I stood to greet him as well, excitement coursing through me at the sight.



Milo

Raven and Mia were up from the sofa, ready to greet me before I could open the door. My two favorite girls in the world.

I acted annoyed as Mia hugged me hard enough to tip me back. "What's up, little one?"

"I'm not so little anymore." Mia pouted, and I pouted back. She grinned at my imitation of her.

Then there was her. She was smiling that smile at me. The one where she looked at me like I was her entire world.

I hated it.

I loved it.

Raven placed a hand on my shoulder and leaned in to kiss me on the cheek. A zing shot through my body, and my heartbeat picked up. Soft, such soft lips. How did she keep them this soft? I held my breath until she moved back.

The kiss was too short. The kiss was too long.

Her lips were too much. I missed her lips.

Raven was a walking contradiction for me.

What the fuck was wrong with me? Raven was fifteen, a sophomore in high school. I was a month shy of turning nineteen and a sophomore in college. She was too young for my wayward thoughts. Not to mention, Reid would go ballistic. He lost it whenever Raven took my side during arguments. They grew up relying on each other as an escape from their shit parents. Reid believed Raven belonged to him.

However, Raven was now my escape from this shit life, too. I needed her, but Reid would never see it that way.

I turned my attention to Reid, who was already scowling. Great. What did I do this time? I'd barely walked through the door. How could I have ruined the great Reid Sinclair's night?

"You're late."

"Sorry, man. There was a lot of traffic. Did you guys start the movie?"

"We're almost done. You missed it."

"No, you didn't," Raven piped in. "God, Reid. You are such a drama queen."

The girl melted my heart. She had my back and made everything in my life better.

Mia turned impatient at our dilly-dallying. "Let's go! Movie!"

We headed to the living room. Mia threw herself on the rug, stretching out on her stomach in front of the TV. I dropped my backpack and plopped on one side of the sofa with Raven next to me. My heart stopped when her scent hit my senses. The vanilla smell. It was familiar; it was her. The scent was barely accessible, making it more intoxicating. I leaned toward her to follow the intoxicating aroma.

Stop it. Stop it. Stop it.

I straightened upon realizing my action and stared straight ahead at the television. Reid tugged Raven toward his end of the sofa. A pang of jealousy hit me. I wasn't worried about a romantic connection between the

two. Once Reid started parading around his bevy of girls, I searched Raven's reaction. She seemed amused and ended up befriending most of the girls. Even Raven couldn't act that aloof if it weren't her truth.

However, they had a natural connection, one I craved with Raven. They cuddled and walked hand in hand since they were babies. Their connection was easy. There was no sexual tension, so they were physically comfortable with one another. It killed me.

Raven spoke of their souls being connected because they were two codependent damaged adolescents. But my soul was profoundly connected to her, too. In the last couple of years, Raven was the only person I sought for solace. She was my confidante. On the nights I was home, Raven came to my room, and we spoke for hours.

She often discussed her mom. Theresa had been a better mother as of late. Like Uncle John, Theresa was overtly expressive of her gratitude for taking Raven in. I wasn't her biggest fan, but I behaved politely because she was trying. Theresa had been diligent about paying Raven's school tuition and sent me monthly checks to cover any other expenses. Raven shared her mother's love for fashion and wanted to attend FIT, the Fashion Institute of Technology. She showed me her designs and spoke of the innovative materials she planned to use. The sketches and outfits were as unique as Raven.

In turn, I spoke to Raven about my shitty life. I discussed the panic attacks I started experiencing a few years ago. Anti-anxiety medications helped, though I hated taking them because they came with risks of addiction. Every risk had to be assessed with dependents relying on you. I also opened up about my challenging family. Mom had sunk deeper into depression. We tried everything—psychiatrists, therapy, antidepressant drugs—all failed attempts.

Dad worked hard to keep us afloat. We had more money coming in with his new position as a visiting physician in the Cayman Islands. He flew home once a month, but it was hard not having his support. I no longer had a backup.

I didn't expect to become the sole guardian of my siblings at the age of eighteen. While they were my life, Mia and Reid were challenging. Reid fought me every step of the way. I had found cigarette butts in his room, weed, and random girls. His anger was out of control. I had tried and tried, but his rebellious streak was mentally exhausting.

Mia was my light, but she was difficult, too. She needed a nanny—someone who could pick her up from school and take care of her—but she chased away the vetted professionals.

On top of taking care of them, I wanted to ensure they weren't spoiled rich kids. I forced them to do chores to earn an allowance, do their homework, and set the dinner table. Some days, my schedule was so packed that the idea of waking up the next day and doing it all over again paralyzed me with anxiety.

However, when Raven came into my life, things changed. She put me back together.

It started innocent enough. When she moved in, she'd help clean up after dinner and casually spoke about life. Soon, our discussions evolved. We'd stay up for hours, sharing and pouring out our souls to one another. When I spoke to Raven, she simply listened. She never offered advice or hollow sympathies. Instead, she took on some of my responsibilities. She checked in on Mom, coaxed her into showering, and cleaned her room. She convinced Mia to let the nanny stay so I could experience a normal college life. She was the only person who could deal with Reid. She knew when to stand her ground and when to leave him be to stew in his anger.

Raven did everything in her power to make my life easier and to create flexibility in my schedule. I'd look at her, and for the first time in years, I could breathe. I'd been taking care of everyone, never realizing how much I needed someone to take care of me.

She had a little crush on me, glancing at me like I was the only man in this world. Many of our friends suspected and teased me for it, not expecting me to reciprocate similar feelings. No one took it seriously. I tried not to, either,

chalking it up to adolescent nonsense. It was getting more difficult by the day.

However, Uncle John would lose all respect for me if I chased his fifteen-year-old daughter, who's legally my dependent. I was the older one in this situation and had to make the tough call; the responsible decision. It was hell. I didn't have the heart to tell Raven not to come to my room, but I left the door open, so her actions were perceived as innocent. I restrained myself but masked my expressions so as never to lead her on.

I told myself these feelings were fleeting and would pass. Our emotions were amplified due to our situation. Yet, time barely moved without her. I always watched the time, drowning in my obsession and waiting for the clock to announce the next minute. Another minute to pass meant another moment closer to going home to her for those four days.

My biggest hope was Raven getting over her feelings.

My biggest fear was Raven getting over her feelings.

As mentioned, my feelings for her were a paradox, which was why it was killing me to sit here without touching her. I couldn't get a read on her as she watched the movie. She was less than a foot away, but it might as well be a million miles.

Unable to help myself, I wrapped my hand around her right foot. It was tucked against me on the couch. Her head was on Reid's shoulder, but she twisted to the side and glanced at me. I squeezed gently before tickling her foot. In turn, Raven gave me that smile. My heart swelled, making another moment without her bearable.

As long as she kept showering me with that look, anything was bearable.

CHAPTER 4

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Raven

I WAS TURNING SEVENTEEN TONIGHT. WE WERE TURNING SEVENTEEN tonight.

Another year and another joint party organized by Milo. At midnight, Reid and I would turn seventeen. Everyone was at the venue. Milo had arranged for a limo to pick us up, so we could make a grand entrance.

I put on the finishing touches while waiting for the limo. I had straightened my hair tonight and wore more makeup than before. I was nervous about the outfit Mom had sent for the occasion, so I kept adding more makeup, hoping it'd somehow distract from the semi-provocative clothes. Now, I felt subconscious about having overdone it.

Theresa Beckett Special was what we called Mom's scandalous clothes. The two-piece attire for tonight was tight. The top was white and resembled a bra. It had thin straps and showed a bit of cleavage. The skirt began where the top ended, exposing my midriff.

I was shocked my mother sent me these outfits. Perhaps Europe was more open-minded?

I completed the outfit with dangle earrings and high-heeled Louboutins before marching down the stairs to meet Reid. I spotted him standing in the foyer. He was in a button-down shirt and black slacks. He had bulked up in the last couple of years. The little boy I knew was now a tall, two-hundred-pound man. His shirt highlighted his muscled frame. He was freshly showered and shaved. If possible, he looked better than usual. His flock of admirers would shit themselves when they saw him, and I was a lucky girl to have such a good-looking escort.

Reid stared incredulously as I descended. Damnit. This outfit was too much. I would have selected something else had Mom not insisted we send her a video message at midnight. She'd be upset if I wasn't wearing her hand-selected choice in the video.

"Damn, Rave." I laughed when Reid coughed. He whistled like the cocky bastard that he was. "You look hot. I have to kill a lot of handsy dudes tonight when they try to maul you."

I laughed again. "Not looking so bad yourself. Should I also threaten the women who look at you with perverse intentions?"

"If it bothers you, then yes. Please do." He lowered his voice, wiggling his eyebrows.

"Ha-ha... Is the limo here?"

Reid opened the door for me, staring after me as we walked through it. "Yeah."

"Stop it. You're making me self-conscious. Fucking Theresa Beckett Specials."

"I love it. I hope she never stops sending you these. But maybe you should only wear them around the house. Then Milo and I don't have to fight perverts who eye-fuck you."

I smacked his stomach with my purse before sliding inside the limo. We wasted no time and had the driver blast our favorite station. Reid pressed

the button to close the partition and pulled out two flasks. He handed me one, and we raised the flasks in unison.

“Cheers to us. Happy Fucking Birthday.”

“Happy Fucking Birthday to you!”

We took swigs from the flasks and moved to the music. Our hands were in the air, dancing the best we could from our seated positions as we sang along to the lyrics. Thank God the partition was closed. Reid and I had terrible voices. No one should have to witness this.

After a while, Reid reached out to turn down the music. I shot him a look with a telepathic question. What's up?

“Rave, I fucking love you. I love sharing my birthdays with you.”

“Well, I fucking love you, too. I hate sharing my birthdays with you. I want the attention all to myself.”

We threw our heads back and laughed.

“Hey, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about something.”

I sent him another silent question. About what?

“Milo.”

I rolled my eyes. Milo was a sore topic between us. Reid disliked his brother laying down the law. I saw it as a caretaker who cared. Trust me, there were worse things than someone caring enough to say no. At this point, we were at an impasse.

“Don’t, Reid. He saved all the money Uncle Reese gave him for household expenses to throw us this epic party. Can we just have a good time tonight? Please.”

Reid ran a hand down his face.

“Jesus, calm down. I'm not trying to pick a fight. It’s statements like those that I want to talk to you about.” Reid appeared sad, not angry, which was

atypical. “Look, I’m just going to say it. You’re supposed to be my best friend. But this obsession you have with Milo is a big obstacle in our friendship.”

I didn’t like where this was headed. However, we’d hit traffic and we’re moving at a snail’s pace. If there were things he wanted to discuss, we had all the time in the world.

“You look at him like he is your whole world. Like he is God. I’ve felt jealous for years, but I didn’t say anything. Instead, I lashed out. Before, it was you and me against the world. We looked out for one another. You looked at me like I was your world. And now you only look at Milo that way.” Reid paused, shifting in his seat awkwardly.

Okay, I can see his point. Fair enough. I silently communicate, Go on.

“You guys have been so in sync recently. Like you have an unspoken understanding. It sucks.” Reid closed his eyes and leaned back. “Dude, I get it. Everyone loves Milo for taking care of us. I can be angry at him, but even I worship him. He did everything for me. Still does.”

Reid was silent, and I didn’t make a peep. I wanted to hear his thoughts.

“It’s not my fucking fault that my parents forced Milo into this position.” Reid’s eyes were down, and his hands clasped on his lap. “I wasn’t presented with the opportunity to act as your guardian. It doesn’t mean I’m incapable of it. If I had the chance, I could also prove that I could take care of you. You’re my best friend. I’ll always take care of you.”

It was true. Before moving into the Sinclair home, Reid often had me stay over because of my home situation and invited me to every family outing. Dad was scatterbrained when we moved to New York. He’d forget to give me lunch money. If I stayed at their house, Milo packed me lunch. Otherwise, Reid would have a tray of food waiting for me at our cafeteria table, leaving no room for my reluctance. He’d do anything for me like I would for him.

Had I been acting so obsessive? Did Reid not know I also thought the world of him?

“You have this weird fixation with parental figures. That’s something I can never be for you. It just sucks to lose your attention because of something I have no control over.” Reid was articulating this conversation well. His thoughts were concise and well put together. This spiel was rehearsed. He wasn’t lying about wanting to have this talk. The liquid courage gave him the push he needed.

“Reid—”

“Let me finish. It might be the tequila talking, but I want to get this out in the open. You look at Milo with admiration and respect, like everyone else. You do everything to make him notice you, to make him say he is proud of you. Anytime something big happens, you call him instead of me. I hate him for taking you away from me, and I don’t want to hate Milo.”

Reid’s body shook with a shudder, like he was gearing up to say something worse. I braced myself. Whatever he was about to say would be hard to process.

“To me, these feelings of admiration seem more than platonic. It feels like you’re infatuated with him. Anyone observing would draw the same conclusion. It’s like you’re in love with him. I can’t stomach it.”

And there it was—the heinous thought. It had me speechless. Almost. “That’s ridiculous! I can’t believe you’d suggest that.” I refused to let such an insinuation pass. “Milo is legally my guardian.”

“And I’m supposed to be your Best. Fucking. Friend.” He enunciated each word as if emphasizing the meaning. “Look, Rave. I hate to pull this card, but you were my friend first. I’ve been irritated about it for years, but I didn’t know how to address it. I’m addressing it for my sanity.”

His proclamation hung in the tense air between us. Reid continued, “Ever since we were kids, I’ve only had you. I can’t talk to any of my other friends. Nor can I talk to my groupies, as you call them, about the shit at home. If I lose you, I won’t have anyone. And every time I see you with Milo, I feel like I’m losing you. The whole world loves Milo and looks at me like I’m the fuck up. I can’t be second-best in your eyes, too. I only

have your admiration, and he wants to take that away from me. I don't want to hate him, but this jealousy is destroying my relationship with Milo. It's also fucking with our friendship. I'm not asking for much, just put some distance between the two of you. I'm sorry if that's unfair, but I can't share you with him. I just can't. The truth is, I need you more than he needs you."

I silently reflected on his words. Reid didn't rush me for a response, aware of my preference to process thoughts and analyze my emotions first.

"You are right. You're absolutely right," I finally admitted. "I'm sorry. I've been a shitty friend."

Reid was right on all accounts. Why didn't I see this before? Reid had been angry for a long time. It had gotten worse every year, and it was my fault. I didn't understand his anger toward Milo. Now, it made sense.

I loved being Reid's favorite person. In return, I'd made Reid feel Milo was my favorite person. In my desperation for love from a father figure, I left Reid in the cold and ruined their relationship.

This insatiable need to please an authority figure had taken a sick form. Milo never expected anything, but I'd probably walk to his dorm every day if he patted me on the head and said, Good girl.

Another horrifying realization crossed my mind.

Reid made it sound like I was a lovesick puppy, filled with more than sisterly love and admiration for Milo. I could see why he made such a presumption. I trusted Milo to know best. I didn't do anything unless Milo approved of it. I did everything to make him happy or proud. In my obsession to make Milo happy, I'd been acting like some desperate, infatuated adolescent.

I texted him constantly. When he slept at the house, I sought him out, searching for words of encouragement about my accomplishments or academic success.

Reid had misconstrued my feelings. Milo must think I was pathetic about how I'd been throwing myself at him. Oh, God. I probably made him

uncomfortable with my advances. I had acted like one of those groupies who chased the Sinclair brothers. A psycho stalker. I was ashamed of my behavior.

Well, it stopped today. Milo was my hero. I would always seek his approval, but I could stop acting desperate. Reid was right. I needed to distance myself from Milo and ration my texts and calls.

Reid glanced at me tentatively while I made these decisions in my head. I decided to disclose my thoughts. “I seek Milo’s approval because I can’t bear the thought of another parent leaving me. I do have a parent complex. But you have to trust me, this is more about my abandonment issues than any romantic interest.”

Reid silently nudged me to continue.

“I got sidetracked in my fucked-up head. You’re the most important person to me, and I’m so sorry if I made you feel otherwise. Thank you for talking to me. I didn’t realize how poorly I was behaving until you explained how my actions came off. I promise you; I’ll work on a more appropriate relationship with Milo. You are my other half. I wouldn’t jeopardize that.”

Reid appeared visibly relieved. His face broke out in a grin big enough to split it in half. “Damn. If I knew it’d be so easy, I would have told you when we were fourteen. Why do you have to be so mature and understanding? I was looking forward to a fight.”

“If you like, I can still fight you. Let’s call it your birthday present.”

“Is that your way of telling me you didn’t get me a real gift?”

“You don’t want the present? Fine, I won’t fight you.”

We were both grinning. Reid grabbed a flute from the limo bar and poured a glass of champagne. Taking my hand, he quickly kissed it before handing me the flute.

“So, I am your other half, huh?”

“Duh! What are we going to do when we have significant others? Who will deal with our codependency? At this rate, I’ll die a virgin.”

“If you’re worried, I can help you take care of it.”

God, this boy was a flirt when he drank. “Please, I don’t need you and your STDs to break my hymen.”

“Your hymen will love my STDs.” Reid winked. “Seriously, Rave. Why are you hanging on to it? Waiting for someone special?”

“Meh.” I shrugged. “Feels like I’ll never be interested enough to go all the way. I considered going lesbian.”

“You did?” Reid leaned in.

I giggled. “I forgot to tell you. I almost kissed Amy Flinch a couple of years ago after a house party.”

“No fucking way. What happened?”

I laughed at Reid’s ridiculously excited face. We were already plastered. “Honestly, I pulled away at the last minute. I didn’t feel the chemistry. That’s what it comes down to—science. We’re attracted to people because of smells and pheromones. Attraction is undeniable. I just haven’t experienced it.”

“I know what you mean.”

“No, you don’t. You have a rotation of groupies coming in and out of our house. Don’t empathize with my situation. You don’t fit in with my weirdness.”

“I fit in with all your weirdness. And a physical act doesn’t mean attraction or chemistry. I don’t necessarily feel the chemistry when I meet a good-looking girl. I can objectively confirm she is pretty and have a good time hooking up with her. It doesn’t mean there is a raw, carnal attraction or we have an unexplainable pull.”

“Keep that in mind when you aren’t feeling chemistry with the groupies throwing themselves at you tonight.”

“Before I forget, here you go.” Reid took out a small box from his jacket pocket and handed it to me, grinning ear to ear. “Open it later.”

“And here you go.” I surprised him with a box of my own that I took out of my purse.

“And here we are!” Reid threw his hands up as the limo came to a stop and the chauffeur opened the door.

Reid and I put away our gifts and headed inside the party. We were guided to the elevator that took us to the rooftop restaurant. We walked out of the elevator and into a stream of greetings, cheers, and “Happy Birthdays.”

Our friends surrounded us as the welcome committee. Milo had gone all out. He rented a section of the rooftop restaurant and it looked fantastic. There was a DJ, a photo booth, arcade games, and a dessert table. My heart panged upon realizing that Milo did the dessert table for me. Reid hated sweets.

This was going to be harder than I thought.



Milo

I’d been staring at the entrance, barely responding to the people addressing me. Usually, I was more polite.

Where are they? Where is she?

Our family friends were here, along with Raven and Reid’s high school friends. My friends, who had become close to Reid and Raven through our house parties, were in attendance, too. Thank fuck. I’d be blowing out my brains if I had to babysit a room full of teenagers.

Other than the hormonal teenagers and the raging college students, there was another attendant—Mia. Against my better judgment, Raven convinced me to let Mia attend. Mia’s curfew had been extended, and the little devil

was milking every second. Mia was in one of Raven's outfits, a Theresa Beckett Special. Instead of looking like a twelve-year-old, she looked fifteen. I hated it.

Mia was thrilled to be included in one of our parties. She wanted to play the part, so Raven dolled her up. As a birthday gift to Raven, I wasn't allowed to protest. Leave it to Raven to use her birthday gift on one of us. At least part two of her gift was only for her. I couldn't wait to see her expression when I gave it to her.

Which brought me back to, Where the hell was she? The limo should have dropped them off by now. Impatience coursed through me as my eyes transfixed on the door. I turned to the bar for another drink when I heard everyone cheering and screaming, Happy Birthday!

Reid and Raven had arrived.

My eyes landed on her. The first thing I noticed was her hair. Her dark, beautiful hair bounced, flowing and falling. As people shuffled, I finally saw her silhouette. The wind was knocked out of me when I saw her outfit. That dress might as well be painted on. It was too fucking tight, hugging every one of her curves.

My eyes locked on her sexy as fuck legs, made longer by her heels. I lifted my gaze to her midriff, which showed a little skin. I couldn't look away. I needed to because I shouldn't be looking at her this way.

Fucking Theresa Beckett Specials—they left nothing to the imagination. And right now, mine was running wild.

She was too popular for her good. She was surrounded by mindless men fawning over her. I could hear every guy's lewd thoughts because I had similar notions. I was a miserable soul like the rest of them.

I wanted everyone to disappear. They could drop dead for all I cared. I didn't care if I couldn't have her. I didn't want them to have her, either.

These weren't mature or selfless thoughts. I wasn't selfless, though everyone looked at me as if I were. I wondered what they'd think if they

knew of my constant war between wanting Raven and having to keep my distance.

I popped my jaw and pulled out my phone, needing to direct her attention away from those fuckers.

Milo: Hey, bday girl! Come find me after you are done being mauled by the peasants.

The phone in Raven's hand lit up. She glanced at it without unlocking it and tensed.

What the hell?

In all the years I'd known her, Raven never failed to respond to me. Usually, she texted me throughout the day. When I texted back, her response was immediate. That's how I got by when I had an onslaught of panic coursing through me.

Was she mad at me? I racked my brain, wondering how I could have pissed her off. Raven wasn't one to hold grudges about petty shit.

Maybe I was overanalyzing it. She was busy with her friends and would saunter over after hugging the herd of cattle surrounding her. I needed to calm down. I was just nervous as hell about her gift.

The envelope held an itinerary. Theresa left her job after gaining enough popularity to start a fashion line. She was currently setting up a store in Paris. She would be moving there permanently and hosting a fashion show to launch her new line. It was a big show, guaranteed to propel Theresa's career. When I found out, I sent Theresa some of Raven's designs. She was inspired enough by one of them to make an outfit. She'd be showcasing Raven's design at this show.

Mia is visiting Grand Cayman this summer. Dad's offer as a visiting physician was extended. I was okay with it but realized I couldn't take care of three teenagers and my Mom. Taking care of Mom was a full-time job, and I had to put Reid, Mia, and Raven's well-being first. Dad agreed with

my assessment and took Mom to the Cayman Islands. She had been doing better. The sunshine and water had jived with her.

Things turned significantly better after Mom left, especially with Raven's help. I didn't feel overextended. Dad sent me a steady stream of money to cover our expenses, plus more. Our grades were on par. Reid fought me, per usual, but there was no other drastic teenage rebellion to report. Who knew things would be better without our parents around?

Dad flew back every month to visit. If she could muster up the energy, Mom joined him, too. During school vacations, Dad flew us out to the Cayman Islands. Those three loved the water. I loved it, too, because I didn't have to stress about responsibilities while on the island. Dad was excellent about taking over.

However, this summer, only Mia would be joining them. Reid and I will be joining Raven and Theressa in Paris. Raven didn't know. Our families had been instructed to keep it a secret until the fashion show.

I paid extra for a flexible flight ticket. Raven could choose her outbound and return flights. If she wanted, she could fly out with Reid and me, which I'd guess would be her preference. For that to happen, I had to give her the envelope burning a hole in my jacket pocket. So why was I still at the stupid bar with Raven nowhere in sight?

I craned my neck to search for her. Raven had excused herself from the crowd of imbeciles vying for her attention. Instead of finding me, she was headed to the dance floor with Reid.

This was weird. She still hadn't acknowledged me.

I tried to snap out of it and stop being self-absorbed. This party was in celebration of her and Reid's birthday. They should enjoy the night, and I should enjoy it with them.

I headed to the dance floor to join them. Soon as I reached Raven and Reid, I threw my hands out to take them into a joint hug.

"Happy Birthday!"

“Thank you, Milo!” they sang in unison and embraced me with a double hug.

The music on the dance floor was too loud for conversation, and I couldn’t assess Raven’s mood while swarmed by our friends. We danced in a group as guests piled onto the dance floor until it was packed.

Reid and Raven sang along while dancing. We laughed as those two butchered our favorite songs. They were horrendous singers. The lyrics were wrong, as were their tunes. I recorded tons of blackmail videos on my phone to use at their next party.

They danced with everyone but stayed by each other’s side. I felt a familiar pang of jealousy, the one I regularly felt at their easy connection. I brushed it off.

Out of nowhere, Reid threw his arms around me. “Thanks for the awesome party, bro,” Reid said without looking at me like I was the devil incarnate.

“Happy Birthday, little bro. Are you happy with the turnout?”

“Are you freaking kidding me? You outdid yourself. Really, thank you! You’re the best.”

“Oh, yeah? Last week you told me to choke on a dick.”

“I... I was pissed about something, and I’ve been a little shit. I’m sorry.” Reid appeared guilty and ran a hand through his hair. His face suddenly turned serious. He jumped on the stage and whispered something to the DJ. The music wound down, and Reid grabbed the mic.

“Hello, friends and family,” Reid’s voice boomed from the microphone. “Thank you for coming tonight. Raven and I are having the best night ever.”

Everyone joined in to clap, hoot, and cheer.

“For those who don’t know my brother, Milo, he threw this party for us.” He pointed at me. “Yes, the good-looking asshole over there.”

More cheers and hoots followed.

“I want to take a moment to recognize my wonderful brother. He is the best man I know and the best older brother. He’ll sacrifice everything for us and ask for nothing in return. Milo is annoyingly patient with me, though I’m an asshole who deserves an ass-kicking.” Reid held up his fingers and made a scout’s honor sign. “So, I, Reid Sinclair, want to take this solemn oath in front of everyone. From now on, I shalt be an asshole no more.”

A round of amused laughter from our guests filtered throughout the room.

Reid raised an imaginary glass. “And I want to raise a glass to my wonderful brother. Thank you for everything you do and for never giving up on me.”

Our guests raised their glasses and yelled, Cheers!

“Now, let’s party!” Reid shouted, and his body dove back to the dance floor as the music started thumping.

Was that a sincere apology and a promise of a better future? Things had been on and off with Reid. I could deal with a grumpy teenager, but Reid’s out-of-control behavior scared Mia. If she no longer had to witness our fights, I’d take the win.

I turned to find Raven. Grinning, I took her into my arms. She tensed and turned it into a quick hug with a pat on the back. Again, weird.

“Hey, birthday girl.”

“Hey, Milo. Sorry I didn’t see you there.”

“No worries. Are you having fun?”

“Yes, of course. Thank you for organizing this. This is wonderful.”

“Of course.”

“Hey, I see a couple of friends I wanted to say hello to. Will you excuse me?”

“Sure.”

“See you around. And thank you again. This really is a wonderful party.”

I was stumped. Did Raven brush me off? She seemed friendly. She thanked me twice and was perfectly nice and polite. However, she wouldn't make eye contact. Something was off.

My deliberations were interrupted when Reid's arm hooked around my neck.

“Awesome speech. Should I be flattered or concerned about how much you drank?”

“I meant it,” Reid replied. “Things will be different.”

Raven froze me out while Reid treated me to hugs and smiles. Was today opposite day?

Everyone returned to the dance floor, while I politely dodged the females trying to dance with me. Not interested. I needed to keep a safe distance from these frisky teenagers. More importantly, I needed a drink.

I headed to the restaurant bar. It was packed with my college friends, including Brandon, Asher, Jaci, and Alexa. We were close and had been working on launching an iOS app together. It started as a project for one of our classes. Our professor was impressed and suggested networking to find investors. He contributed to our first round of fundraising and invited us to exclusive networking events. We'd met potential investors interested in acting as our silent partners. The app was in the developmental phase. The release date was set for the summer of next year, which meant our senior year would be spent fixing bugs and beta-testing the app.

We discussed our next course of action for the summer. I'd spend a good portion of it in Paris but planned to remain involved via email and calls. As we spoke, I couldn't help watching Raven from the corner of my eye. Most of the men tonight were watching her, too, unable to tear their leering eyes off her.

When she passed by, I tried to engage her in conversation. She dodged me the way I had avoided her annoying friends. My ego was severely bruised,

and I was beyond frustrated.

“Who do you keep looking at?” Alexa followed my gaze.

“No one.”

“Doesn’t seem like no one to me.”

Were all the women in my life trying to annoy me to death tonight? I smiled politely. “Come on, guys. I’ll buy you a round of shots.”

We took the shots and then did another round. Soon enough, Alexa turned handsy. Too handsy. We had hooked up in the past, but I’d made it clear I didn’t want anything past a friendship. I hadn’t lived a celibate life, but lately, something was missing during sex—a release without emotional ties.

I politely declined Alexa’s advances. She took the hint. Alexa wasn’t a pushy girl, thank God. That’s why we could remain friends.

Still, I remained irritated throughout the night. At midnight, we cheered and sang Happy Birthday to Reid and Raven. A little after, I received a text from the limo driver. I’d asked him to return shortly after midnight so that I could take Mia home. Moving to the dance floor, I searched for the little troublemaker.

“Mia, the limo is here.”

“Thank God. Let’s go. My feet are killing me. And I hate this dress; it itches.”

I was shocked. Wearing big girl heels had caught up with Mia. Maybe I didn’t mind her wearing heels and dressing up after all. Not if it sucked out some of her extra energy.

“All right, grab your things.”

I searched for Raven, wondering if she wanted to go home with us. At the back of my mind, I was praying for her to be done with this party. However, Raven was nowhere to be found.

“Let’s go.” Mia tugged my hand impatiently, whining to go back home.

I took solace in the fact that I'd never seen Raven display interest in men. Those fuckers could leer. It would never happen. Resignedly, I hugged Reid goodbye, reminding him the limo would return in an hour to pick them up.

The ride home was quiet. Mia passed out, exhausted from dancing in high heels. My mind, however, was reeling from Raven's aloof nature. It left a tightness in my chest that I couldn't explain.

Once we were home, I carried Mia inside and put her to bed. I also tried to turn in but felt the onset of a panic attack. My heart pumped, ready to burst out of my chest. I took deep breaths, but the oxygen wouldn't reach my lungs.

I needed Raven. She always talked me down. If I were at the house, she'd stroke my cheeks. If I was on campus, we spoke on the phone, and she counted down with me. Hell, even texting with her soothed me.

This was the first time I'd experienced a panic attack while Raven was indisposed. I'd been relying on the serenity she brought to my life. I'd become accustomed to dealing with my attacks through her tranquility. I took it for granted. I took her for granted.

One night. It was only one night when Raven wasn't at my beck and call. Just one night, she was distracted by a party—one in her honor, no less—and I couldn't deal with it. I was falling apart, paralyzed without her.

My expectations of her were unfair. I was supposed to care for her, not the other way around. Yet, the truth was difficult to deny. I had been taking care of everyone while she had taken care of me.

I took shallow breaths. Despite my better judgment, I took an anti-anxiety pill. It slowed my heart rate, but not the way Raven calmed me. The thought of her pinched my chest. I couldn't shake the weird vibe from tonight. I needed to clear the air. I also wanted to give her the gift. When I heard voices outside, I grabbed the envelope from my jacket pocket without overthinking it and let myself into Raven's room.



Rave

I did as Reid suggested. I put distance between Milo and me. It had already brought peace into the Sinclair family.

Reid's moods had been bipolar over the last few years. At times, he got along with Milo. They had a gym routine and hung out as a family. At other times, Reid went off about the pettiest things. Milo was concerned about the negative effect of these arguments on Mia. Once, Mia started crying while Reid was yelling at Milo. While Milo shielded Mia, Reid wasn't eager to comply.

Well, I planned to help Milo keep the peace, even if he didn't know of it.

True to his word, Reid had been a loving brother tonight. There wasn't a snarky comment or a passive-aggressive remark. I couldn't remember the last Sinclair outing without Reid's backhanded comments to Milo.

In exchange, I had to hang out with my best friend without staring at his brother like a creeper. It was safe not to consider this a massive sacrifice.

Tonight, Reid recognized Milo's contributions to his life. Milo looked so pleased during Reid's speech. He had been yearning for Reid's appreciation while Reid had been yearning for mine. Reid couldn't give Milo what he needed until I hopped on board.

Milo needed his brother. Reid needed me. Mia needed both her brothers to be in harmony. At the same time, I needed all three of them to survive my otherwise lonely life. If it meant not acting like—oh God, I shuddered at the next thought—like a groupie, that was a bonus. I liked those girls, but they hung around Milo, making moon eyes, hoping he'd throw them a bone.

Yuck. Self-respect, where art thou?

During our party, I caught Alexa drooling over Milo. I refused to follow Milo around like a duckling. I'd been in a religious cult, praying to the church of Milo, and I needed to snap out of it. This dose of reality was crucial, and I wished Reid had had this conversation with me years ago.

I might miss my special friendship with Milo, but the way Reid worded it, it sounded like a one-sided friendship anyway. I cherished Milo's guidance and mentorship. Every bit of his advice and suggestion has proven beneficial to my life. However, giving it up would return a non-angry Reid to our lives.

Reid and I danced to another set of songs during the ride home. When the limo came to a stop, Reid pulled me out, taking me into a bear hug. I screamed when he twirled me, laughing until he set me down. With his arms around me, Reid leaned back to inspect my face.

"Thank you. Tonight was awesome. We haven't had that much fun in so long." He gave me a soft, appreciative kiss on the cheek before resting his forehead against mine.

I smiled in agreement. We got high with some school friends. We also drank a lot. The mind-altering substances were hitting me. I twined our fingers as we stumbled inside. "I'm exhausted. Good night."

"What? No way. Let's get in our PJs and watch Borat. Borat! Borat!" Reid chanted.

Watching Borat was a time-honored tradition on our birthdays, but I preferred a rain check for the morning. I was exhausted.

"No, dude, I'm done. Too drunk. Too high," I mumbled as Reid pouted. "Good night, Stud." I stood on my tippy-toes and kissed him on the cheek.

"Good night, Beautiful."

I wanted to face-plant on my mattress. Swinging open my bedroom door, I turned on the lights and almost jumped. Sitting on my bed was none other than Milo himself.

"Milo. Hi. Hey. How are you?"

Why was I so awkward? Apparently, I'd been stalking this man for years—albeit without meaning to do so—and now, I couldn't word a simple greeting.

Hi. Hey. How are you?

What the hell, Raven?

Sober. Up. Right. Now.

Though I was drunk and high, I had to clear the fog fast. Milo was staring at me like I was a lunatic. I willed my mind to sober up and form cohesive thoughts. I also reminded myself of the promise I made to Reid.

My objective was to ensure everyone in this family got along. My method to do this was through compartmentalization. I had to separate Milo—the guardian—from Milo, the friend. I could no longer be part of this Milo cult, though Milo-ism was the true religion and he was a God—

Fuck. Stop it. Stop it. Stop it.

I changed tactics.

What if I pretended that my job was for this family to get along, and I earned my living through the currency of love and a warm home? If this were my profession, public displays of religious acts would be deemed unprofessional at the workplace. If I genuinely believed Milo-ism to be a religion, I had to maintain professional boundaries, though religious beliefs could coexist. If the two were in conjunction, I'd have an amicable solution. I had to show Milo respect while maintaining a professional distance.

My mind raced with philosophical ideas while in my high and drunken stupor. However, my motor skills hadn't caught up. I couldn't form words.

"Rave. Did you hear what I said?"

No. "Yes."

"What did I say, Rave?"

I focused my energy on forming the words. "You want to talk." Don't see him like a god. There was no reason to idolize someone because they took you in, gave you a family, became your legal guardian, showered you with love, and filled your empty heart.

Oh. My. Fucking. God. I did have a problem with this Milo obsession. I grabbed the water off my nightstand and chugged the contents inside the glass.

“Thirsty much?”

“Yes... much,” I slurred before catching myself.

"Are you drunk?"

Yes. "No, just tired."

“Okay. Wait here. I'll be right back.”

Milo was gone in a flash. Was it a hallucination? Reid and I had an edible, along with copious amounts of alcohol. So, it must have been a dream. I made a mind fuck analogy for no reason. I forced myself to sober up, and it was only for Dream Milo.

I fell backward on the bed and stared at the ceiling. Of course, it was a dream. Dreams were our conscience surfacing what was on our minds. Right now, I felt guilty.

Guilty for creating a rift between the Sinclair brothers, making Reid resent his brother, and putting Mia through unnecessary family drama. I feel guilty for making Milo uncomfortable with my advances. My actions were meant to portray my gratitude, not a sexually charged teenager.

Shamelessly, I felt more pain than guilt over giving up my close friendship with Milo. It was a closeness I craved above everything in this world. That's why I conjured Milo.

If I did it once, I wondered if I could do it again. I squinted my eyes to conjure my guardian, so he could tell me he was proud, that I was worth sticking around for, and that he loved me.

I opened my eyes. My subconscious did well. Milo stood in front with a glass of water in hand.



Milo

“Here, drink this.”

I sat the glass of water on Raven’s nightstand. She smiled that smile, the one reserved only for me. Not the bullshit, polite one from earlier. My heart exploded at the massive grin on her face. She was beautiful.

“Okay.”

“You’re in bed with heels on. Aren’t you going to take them off?”

Raven lifted her head. “You take them off.”

I chuckled. My mood was brighter from her playfulness. The previous dark thoughts had dissipated. Sinking to my knees, I pulled her legs to the side of the bed. I undid the straps of her heels, taking them off one at a time.

“Jesus, these are at least four inches. How the hell did you dance in these?”

“Hehe.”

“Seriously, don’t your feet hurt?”

“Can you rub them—” she trailed off.

This was a terrible idea, though I didn’t deny her request. I braced her feet on my thighs and massaged with the heel of my palm.

“Mmmm.”

The moment I heard Raven’s moan, my muscles moved involuntarily. As if floating out of my body and into astral projection, I stared down from the ceiling and watched my lips kissing her right foot. My body stiffened upon realizing what I had done.

I slowly lifted and sat next to Raven on the bed. She was still in the outfit that gave me a heart attack earlier in the night.

“Aren’t you going to change?” I rasped out.

“Naaa... tell me things?”

“What things?”

“Just things. Things you couldn't say at the party.”

“I wanted to talk to you about that.”

“Okay”

“Were you mad at me tonight?”

Raven turned to face me. She appeared sad. Really fucking sad. “No, Milo. Never at you. Everyone but you.” She placed a hand on my cheek. “You saved me.”

I shattered like a broken mirror. That’s what I was, a shattered mirror on the floor with too many tiny, scattered pieces to put back together.

You saved me.

Raven’s words haunted me because she saved me. She saved me every day. I needed her calming hand on my cheek. Raven—my fucking doctor-ordered prescription.

I turned my head and kissed her palm. It gave me access to her scent, vanilla—the smell of home, comfort, intensity, and obsession. I wanted to smell it again. I covered her hand with mine. I kissed it again before trailing my lips to her pulse.

“Rave—”

“Are you going to leave me?”

“What? What kind of question is that?”

“Don’t ever leave me.”

I reached for her, brushing her cheek with the back of my hand, the other stroking her hair. “I’ll never leave you.”

“You can't leave me. No matter what I do. It'll break my heart if you do. Promise me you won't leave me.”

Raven was rarely emotional, and I stared in bewilderment.

“Say it.”

“I promise I’ll never leave you.”

“No matter what?”

“No matter what.”

“Milo.”

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

I remained silent. Raven stared at me with glossy eyes, and I could no longer take it. I leaned in to kiss her eyelids. I shouldn’t have done that because now, I needed more. Unable to find the strength to stop, I kissed both her cheeks. Next, I kissed her nose, followed by her temple. Raven leaned against my forehead and closed her eyes.

I stared at her mouth for what must have been an eternity. I could hardly breathe as I dipped lower and brushed my lips against hers.

Raven said nothing.

I kissed her again. This time, Raven raised her head to kiss me back. She placed her hand on my cheek as I leaned in. I pressed my lips firmly against hers and took a sharp breath.

“Don’t leave me, Milo,” Raven murmured against my lips, eyes closed.

I didn’t want to, but I had to do it. I couldn’t stay here any longer.

Fuck. I kissed her.

Then I kissed her again.

And she kissed me.

I shook my head. “Go to sleep. We’ll talk about it later.” I pulled the covers and left the water on her nightstand, along with the envelope.

I wanted to see her reaction when she opened the gift, but I had to leave early in the morning. I was meeting the gang on campus to work on a presentation. Later in the evening, we were leaving for Philadelphia. We had investor meetings lined up and had to miss our classes for the week. We were traveling between Philadelphia and DC, returning on Thursday. I didn't want to wait until my return to give her the envelope.

Tonight was a reality check for how much I needed Raven. Though I couldn't be with her, this carefully planned itinerary would portray how much I valued and cared for her. The itinerary had confirmation numbers for her open-ended plane tickets. The envelope also included a list of activities Raven liked. Amongst other things, I bought her a ten-class package for French Cancan dance lessons, something she had been dying to learn. I spent days researching activities close to Theresa's residence.

This trip to Paris was meant to propel Raven's career. She'd gain experience working at her mom's shop, putting together displays, and dressing models. Her outfit would be showcased at a real fashion show, increasing her chances of attending FIT.

After our kiss, the last thing I wanted was to leave her, but I meant it when I said we'd discuss it later. With another kiss on her forehead, I forced myself to close the door on the sleeping beauty.



I had barely heard from Raven in the last couple of days.

She wasn't a confrontational person. Maybe she didn't want to discuss the kiss or was mad that I left. At the very least, I assumed she'd thank me for the envelope.

No such luck.

I wanted to talk about the kiss, but her unresponsive texts made it difficult. The situation was complicated, much like Raven.

My friends knew Raven had a crush on me. I suspect Reid did, too. Everyone thought I humored her while ignoring the silly crush. No one knew that ignoring her feelings was torture, but I had no choice. Her parents trusted me with her care.

For fuck's sake, I couldn't be her boyfriend if I was attending PTA meetings and signing her permission slips. It'd be a scandal of epic proportions if we were to be more. We had too many family friends and too large of a social network. The gossip would spread like wildfire in our community, with everyone jesting and sneering behind our backs. It'd be humiliating for Raven, Reid, Mia, and our parents.

But since the kiss, I hardly cared about those valid reasons. It was barely a kiss, but I kept hearing Raven say she loved me. It tore me up. I called her on Monday after my investor meetings. She didn't pick up or return my call. Instead, she texted me the following day.

Rave: Sorry I didn't get a chance to call you back.

Milo: I was just checking in. How's everything going?

Her next text came late at night.

Rave: Mia is good. We are all doing great. Thank you.

Milo: Did you open the envelope I left on your nightstand?

Again, she left me hanging until the next day.

Rave: Yes, thank you.

The dismissive messages were on my last nerve.

Milo: I take it from the curt responses that you aren't a fan of Paris?

This time her response was quicker but no less infuriating.

Rave: On the contrary, I am leaving early for Paris. I spoke to my teachers. I only have two final papers left. My teachers agreed to let me email them. I am done for the semester.

What the fuck.

Milo: What? Why didn't you check with me before making these decisions?

Rave: I'm checking with you now.

Milo: After you already decided...

No response. Nothing after dropping the bomb. Finally, I received a response after hours of checking my phone.

Rave: You are the one who wanted me to go to Paris.

"This is fucking ridiculous," I muttered to myself.

Milo: You are leaving between your school year.

Rave: I'm not. I am done with my school year.

I stared at the messages. I couldn't believe Raven didn't check with me first. This was unlike her. Anger pounded through me, and I wanted to throw the phone against the wall.

Milo: When are you leaving?

Raven hammered the final nail in the coffin with her response.

Rave: Tomorrow.

Milo: You are leaving before I get home?

Rave: The only available flight was in the morning.

She was making a fast exit, purposely leaving before my return. This went beyond non-confrontational Raven. Something about the way she was bailing didn't add up. That girl pined after me for years, and I finally gave in a little. Wouldn't she want to talk about the kiss at the very least?

Then it hit me.

It happened. Raven was moving on. She wanted to be done with this adolescent crush and wanted to move forward with someone other than her guardian. That's why she was aloof at the birthday party. The kiss was backward momentum for her, not forward.

I reminded myself, this is the way it's supposed to be. We were supposed to outgrow these inappropriate feelings and focus on our roles as guardian-ward. She was making the mature decision. Raven was stronger and possessed more willpower than me. She wanted me for years but never made a move, though my resolve nearly broke numerous times.

Yes, this was the right decision. We needed distance after what transpired.

So, why was I hollow on the inside? It felt as if she had sucker-punched me. If Raven made the right decision by leaving, why was it tearing me in half?



Three Months Later Milo

This summer had been rough; it was the worst one of my life.

I tried to keep busy. Our app had gained traction and investors. I was also gearing up for my last year of college.

Between networking, investor meetings, and fixing bugs on the app, there shouldn't have been time to think. Regardless, the thoughts returned every fucking second. I couldn't take it anymore. The silence. This distance between us.

Unable to help myself, I messaged Raven a few times. She either sent delayed responses or was curt with her texts. She never picked up my calls, making excuses about working at her mom's shop, the time difference, or spotty signals.

Though Raven had made the right decision, it had left a hole in my heart. No one—and I mean, no one—could understand the depths of longing I was experiencing for that girl. They would say I was pussy-whipped if they knew, though we never even had sex. I shouldn't be this stuck on a girl, especially one I never slept with.

Maybe I needed to get laid. I was experiencing my longest dry spell. I had been pining for her and couldn't look at another woman. Since that kiss, all I saw was Raven's face, and all I heard was Raven telling me she loved me.

I fought the urge to fly out to Paris. I fought the urge to devour her the way my body craved. I fought those urges because I knew it was wrong. She was legally my ward, and I was essentially her foster dad.

Rage burnt through my veins as if to scream, I don't care!

My body would never get over the fact it craved her, having decided she was mine and always would be, no matter what. Every part of me was riddled with this sick desire for Raven. I was consumed with this violent frustration over my situation. This wasn't me, yet I had felt out of control over the summer.

A few weeks into summer, Reid left for Paris to join Raven. Against my better judgment, I considered doing the same, but I needed an indication from Raven that she wanted to see me. Fuck. I needed it. I texted to gauge her reaction.

Milo: Hey Rave, Hope you and Reid are having a blast. I was thinking of visiting.

Rave: Oh, Ok. If you want to.

Milo: Do you not want me to come?

Rave: Nothing like that. I just think you'll be bored.

Milo: Why will I be bored?

Rave: Reid and I spend our days helping Mom set up her new shop in Paris. And he mentioned that your app has been doing well. I'd hate to tear you away. It's not that exciting over here.

Milo: I guess. Are you sure you don't want me to visit?

Rave: Positive. Focus on your app :)

We didn't speak after that text. Raven had made her feelings crystal clear.

At least things were better with Reid and Mia. Before he left, Reid and I got along better than we had in years. Mia also didn't give me a hard time about the nanny until departing for the Grand Caymans. She called me daily. I

was no longer overloaded with obligations to Mia and Reid. The panic attacks had become infrequent. When they did strike, they were over my fear of losing Raven. Fear over her moving on without me, while I might never be able to do the same.

I had to rely on anti-anxiety medications over the summer. I hated it. Fuck. I needed Raven to return, even if only for my mental health.

How much longer could I withstand this?

There was a constant desire to ask Reid how she was doing or what she was up to. But I forced myself not to and stayed away from her Facebook page, so I had nothing to feed my obsession.

The obsession grew, nonetheless. It never stopped, and nothing worked. Not time nor space. Nothing filled the void she left. I was missing an integral part of me—something I'd gotten used to having—and the withdrawal was slowly killing me.

I couldn't live like this and made a pact with myself. By the time my senior year started, I would no longer have these feelings. I wouldn't let myself. I vowed to move on with my life.

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CHAPTER 5

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AUGUST 2015



Raven

TONIGHT WAS THE BIG NIGHT—MOM'S FASHION SHOW. IT WAS SUPPOSED TO be huge for her clothing line, and we had been working toward it all summer.

I had been in Paris for almost four months. I worked with Mom most of the time, though I did leave Paris for a short period.

Dad called and invited me to South Africa during my second week in Paris. He barely called me, much less invited me to visit, and I wondered if he did it to compete with Mom.

He flew me to South Africa, taking the week off to show me around. It was beautiful. I visited the townships where Dad worked. I was heartbroken by the conditions and stayed longer to volunteer. I gained a new respect for Dad, despite our broken relationship.

Nonetheless, conversations with him were like pulling teeth. The only discussion we had in common was about the eldest Sinclair son. We were both in agreement about our admiration for Milo.

Reid flew out to join me once I returned to Paris. I was so relieved. My mother was tolerable, but her narcissism took a toll. After years apart, I now struggled to find a comfort zone with both my parents. Reid served as the much-needed buffer. Not to mention, I needed a familiar Sinclair face to feel at home.

We spent most of our summer partying and working. While helping Mom with her new store and upcoming fashion show, we met designers, models, and other people from the industry.

It was the kind of work I dreamt about, living a lifestyle that suited me. Paris had been magical in all aspects except for one—The eldest Sinclair boy, Milo.

Milo kept in touch until the first couple of months but hadn't contacted me after I thwarted his offer to visit. I needed space. The night of my seventeenth birthday party solidified this need. In my high and drunken stupor, I thought I dreamt of Milo. When I woke, I saw an envelope from Milo and smelled his familiar cologne on my comforter. I realized he was there in person, not in my dreams. Despite my promise to keep an appropriate distance, I'd worsened the situation.

The night was hazy, but I remembered telling Dream Milo that I loved him and begged him never to leave me. The following day, Milo left without saying goodbye. When I opened the envelope he had left, I realized how much I had freaked him out.

I found a printed itinerary for a summer in Paris. A highly organized printed agenda.

After hearing my declaration of love, Milo determined that my teenage infatuation was out of control. In typical Milo fashion, he went into a fix-it mode. He probably called Mom to take me for the summer, then put together a fun itinerary to keep me busy, completed with open-ended flight tickets. He bolted before having to face me.

Once more, my feelings were misconstrued by everyone, including Milo. He called me the following Monday, but I was too humiliated to pick up. I

had been avoiding him since.

He was angry at how I left and for ignoring him all summer. I didn't ask for his permission and left before the school year ended. My school, Wellington Academy, allowed students to work independently. I submitted my paperwork and was done for the semester. Regardless, it was disrespectful not to check with my legal guardian before leaving the country.

I couldn't bear to face him. I wanted to cut ties to our special relationship, the one Reid hated, but somehow I had cut ALL ties. Milo was one of my best friends; now, we weren't even friends. I missed him so much.

I didn't blame him for sending me away. I needed the distance to stop being fixated on him. It hit me how uncomfortable I had made him.

Reid and I were returning next week. Reid already booked his flight. My humiliation wouldn't let me search for return flight options.

I had distractions while in Paris. I helped Mom with her shop and worked tirelessly on the upcoming fashion show. Reid and I befriended a plethora of French models and spent our nights partying. I tried my hand at dating, too.

I was tired of being a cliché, yearning for love from mommy, daddy, and guardians. I needed to replace the craving with romantic interests. Determined to try harder, I started dating Michel.

Michel was perfect: gorgeous, tall, and charming. I didn't feel enough to give it up to him; however, I felt brazen enough to try some sexual acts. Ultimately, I realized my attraction was lukewarm. I called it quits a few days ago. Michel wasn't thrilled but agreed to remain friends.

The action-packed summer had come to an end, and I was filled with dread about returning home.

I pushed away thoughts of home as I dressed. Reid and I were dolled up (or suited up, as he called it) for the fashion show, followed by the debaucheries Reid had planned.

As I put on my earrings, I heard the bathroom door creak. Reid strolled out of the bathroom. "Ready to head out?"

"Yep, let me grab my purse."

We walked to the apartment lobby and waved at the concierge. This place had become home over the summer.

I linked arms with Reid. "So, what's on the agenda for later tonight?"

"Alcohol, models, dancing. Need more details?"

I giggled. "Nope, that about covers it. I can't wait to sit by my lonesome self on the sidelines and watch your Parisian groupies rock-paper-scissor about who gets to maul you tonight."

"You're welcome to join in, and because you're my friend, you don't even have to play. I'll throw you the first bone for free."

I laughed. "How very generous of you. I don't deserve such kindness."

"I am a generous guy." Reid suddenly stopped, frowning. "Wait, why will you be alone? What is Michelle doing tonight?"

"It's Michel, and you know it. I broke up with him. Remember?"

"What? You never told me."

"Yeah, I did."

"Umm. I'd remember my best friend breaking up with her boyfriend."

"Hmmm. I could have sworn I told you. Oh well, I broke up with him."

"And?"

"And what?"

"Are you okay? Should we get a pint of ice cream and watch *The Notebook* as you cry me a river?"

He was ridiculous. "Hold on to your ice cream and *The Notebook*. I'm fine. I just never felt the attraction. It made no sense to continue, especially since

we were returning soon."

"If you didn't feel the attraction," Reid said with air quotes, "then why did you go out with him?"

I was silent for a few minutes. I had yet to go into depth with Reid about my issues. "Remember your talk the night of our seventeenth birthday party about how I was acting like a love-crazed teenager around Milo? I was mortified. I didn't realize how my behavior came off to others."

Reid craned his neck to look at me. "I didn't use the words love-crazed teenager."

I shrugged. "I have this constant need for attention from parental figures. I'm always the teacher's pet or the chaperone's favorite on field trips. Dance coaches choose me to be their assistant. For fuck's sake, Mom abandoned me. But look at me doing everything to make her happy."

I was suddenly filled with self-loathing. However, the venue was a fifteen-minute walk. We had time to kill, and I might as well use it wisely.

I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose. "I did the same with Milo. He took over the parental role, and I instantly had a sick craving to make him love me. I am a teenager. I should ignore family to chase boys, get drunk, and go to parties. Instead, I'm stuck in this vortex of pleasing authority figures. I'm consumed by it."

We exited the lobby, stepping onto the sidewalk. I waved my arms in front of me, trying to paint a picture in the fresh air.

"I need to redirect my attention to someone more appropriate. If I date, I can find someone who also showers me with love in return. Then I won't have to humiliate myself in front of parental figures, begging them to love me," I made my closing statement without bitterness lacing my voice.

Reid tilted his face and watched me. "Rave, you don't need to refocus your energy with such extreme measures," he said tentatively. "I didn't understand why you craved Milo's attention. I get it now."

I stared straight ahead, too embarrassed by my confessions.

Reid clasped his hands together. "We both have shitty parents. You had no one. At least, I always had Milo. Unlike our parents, Milo returns our affections. You don't have to beg him to love you. He does that willingly."

Reid rubbed the back of his head with a hand. It was his tick when he felt guilty or nervous.

"I was a jealous asshole. I didn't want to lose my best friend's attention to my brother. I didn't think it would push you into dating men you weren't interested in. I am a selfish piece of shit."

"Reid, no. That's not it. There was truth to your words."

"Even so, I made it sound worse than it was. I'm sorry. Milo loves you. I get why you need his approval and crave a special bond. I won't stand in the way again."

Reid pulled me into a one-handed hug, kissing my temple. I reflected on his words. Despite his approval, I remained unconvinced.

It was comforting to hear Milo loved me and willingly returned my affection. Reid's words made me wonder if I overreacted by distancing myself from Milo. However, he was unaware of what happened the night of the party. I told Milo I loved him. My actions made him uncomfortable enough to send me to Paris for the summer. Which meant my behavior needed changing. Over the summer, I worked on my interactions with Milo and distanced myself. I planned to keep it up upon return. By the time we reached the fashion show, I was adamant in my resolve.

We checked in at the main entrance to enter the large ballroom. The event was in full swing. Every chair was occupied, music blared, and the champagne flowed. Mom was backstage, putting the finishing touches on the models.

Reid and I had front-row seats. We were three glasses of champagne in when the lights turned off, and the show began.

Reid put a hand on my knee. "Easy! I can feel you vibrating. It'll be great."

And it was. Model after model strutted flawlessly, and the outfits looked terrific. My nerves settled. I leaned back, enjoying our hard work coming to fruition.

Toward the end of the show, an outfit caught my eye. I didn't see it on the list, and something about it seemed oddly familiar. I realized why it was so once the model neared us.

My jaw dropped. Before I could decipher, the model had retreated, and Mom walked onto the stage with all the models in tow. The audience stood, clapping and cheering for the successful show. This was a huge moment for her.

Once the clapping subsided, I hunted down my mom. Female admirers swarmed Reid. He had gained a herd of Parisian groupies through our new clique. Must be nice to be a good-looking Sinclair. I didn't feel bad leaving him alone as the models would keep him plenty occupied.

"Surprise!" Mom shrieked, kissing me on the cheek.

"W-What?"

"I hope you liked it. It took everything not to blab, and I lasted all summer. Proud of me?"

"I don't understand. What's going on?"

"Okay, sweetheart. I'll give you the summary." My mom waved her hands dramatically. "Milo sent me your sketches. I had no idea my daughter was so talented." She beamed. "I loved one of them and made the outfit. We wanted to surprise you at the fashion show, but we had problems setting a date for the show—" her voice trailed off.

Mom grabbed a bottle of water from a server as she passed by. She took a quick swig and continued.

"Anyway, Milo got you open-ended plane tickets to ensure you'd be here for the show. I offered to pay for the ticket, but he insisted we split your birthday gift. He paid for the tickets, the dance classes, and your activities. My part was easier. Make the dress, and don't blab to my daughter."

I felt lightheaded at Mom's admission.

"I hope I did you proud, sweetie, and you liked my belated present. Congrats, baby. You're officially a designer. The dress is called It's So Raven." She held up a hand, "I know, I know. Not original. But I had to put something down for a name."

"Mom, you guys did all this? When?" I whispered.

"Oh, honey. Milo worked on this all year. How blessed are we to have the Sinclairs in our lives?" Mom contemplated her words, and her forehead formed a frown. "But I don't understand why he changed his mind about visiting Paris. The plan was for Milo and Reid to join you in Paris after Mia left for the Grand Cayman."

Her words knocked the wind out of me. My lips quivered as I attempted to conjure a response.

I knew why Milo didn't visit Paris. Because I was an ungrateful bitch who told him not to come.

He did everything in his power to give me the summer of my dreams. To propel my career in the city of fashion. I misunderstood his intentions so terribly. This was the most thoughtful gift I had received. He had ripped open my soul, saw what I wanted, and etched it into reality.

"I don't know, Mom," was all I managed to choke out. "But thank you. This was so thoughtful. I love it, and I love you."

"I love you, too, baby."

I couldn't form more words and felt grateful when other attendees snagged Mom. My heart was punctured. I was angry and sad. So sad. I was mad at myself for doubting Milo's intentions. I was sad over how much I missed Milo and our broken bond. I'd pay any price to have it back.

I texted Reid to tell him I was leaving. It wasn't his fault, but I was too irritated. Although irrational, I resented Reid for asking me to tone it down around Milo.

I planned to return to the apartment, pack my bags, and book the earliest possible flight. Then I'd grovel at Milo's feet for acting like a Class A, ungrateful, spoiled brat. I'd beg for his forgiveness for leaving, for disappointing him, and for dismissing him all summer.

How could I have thought Milo was trying to get rid of me? He'd never push me away. No one—and I meant no one—in this world would stick by me as he had. How often did the man have to prove he was the only one capable of loving me unconditionally?



Milo

I finished responding to my last email and turned off my computer. I heard the front door open as I stood from the living room sofa. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught something that made my breath hitch. Actually—not something—someone.

The object of my obsession in flesh and blood. Raven stood at the front door, her hazel eyes transfixed on me.

I couldn't move. This couldn't be real.

My starved eyes took her in. She was different. Her dark hair bounced around her shoulders. She had a tan, making her skin look smoother. She wore black leggings with a low-cut top, adding a European sophistication to her look.

She wore more makeup than I remembered her wearing before. Without makeup, she was an understated beauty and intoxicating to me. With makeup, Raven looked like a vixen, which did all the same things for me.

I swallowed.

Almost four months since I saw her. I missed her. I missed her so fucking much. I promised myself I'd be done with these feelings by the end of

summer. So why hadn't they stopped? If I was over her, why the hell couldn't I breathe just from looking at her?

Raven rolled her large suitcase inside. Setting down her backpack, she shut the door. I stood, ready to gravitate to her like a moth to a flame. Stepping out of the sitting area, I stopped short with a mere foot between us. We stood there for God knew how long, staring at one another.

I told myself I could handle being in the same room with her. I fucking lied to myself.

The time apart didn't decrease my obsession, I confirmed in my mind.

Nope. If anything, it was the opposite. Time had only fed my obsession with her.

Raven appeared tense. My jaw tightened as I remembered the last time we spoke. I was relieved but also angry. And in full-on lust mode.

"Hello, Milo," she finally greeted, tucking a strand of hair nervously behind her ears.

Those two words squeezed down to my soul, tormenting me. Her soft voice stifled the resolve to remain strong.

"Rave, you're back." I tried to smile. "How are you?"

"Good. And you?"

"I'm great. Where is Reid?"

"I-I made a last-minute decision to come home. I took the first available flight. Reid had already booked his and couldn't change it."

"Why did you suddenly decide to come home?"

"I was homesick." Raven paused, then added, "And I missed you. I wanted to see you."

My heart squeezed in my chest once more. My libido flared at the sight of her, the sound of her voice, and her confession. "I'm glad you're back. You

look great.”

“Thank you. You look pretty good yourself.”

Raven gave my body a once over. I knew what she saw in my physique. I had been hitting the gym hard, using it to take out my frustrations. I was in the best shape of my life. Every part of me was pure muscle. I had received more female attention in the last couple of months than before.

Did she notice it, too? Did she like it?

“I’ve been working out a lot,” I said, hearing how hoarse my voice sounded.

She remained silent, but I needed to hear her voice again.

“Did you like your birthday gift?”

“Yes.” Her cheeks turned pink. She fidgeted with her hands. “It was the most beautiful gift anyone had given me. It defined the word perfection.”

Raven stared at me with glossy eyes. She looked at me in a familiar way. It was how she used to look at me before everything went to shit. I had seen attraction in the eyes of many women before, but this went beyond it. The way Raven looked at me surpassed anything I had experienced—like I was her whole damn world.

I needed this. I pined for her look. It was the high I had been chasing, and I was defenseless against it.

“Don’t I get a hug for giving you the perfect present?” What was I saying? I spent my summer trying to forget her. Now I was seeking out physical contact. I must be a masochist.

“Huh?” She sounded just as surprised by my request. I didn’t care. I needed physical contact.

“You said I gave you the perfect gift. Not to mention we haven’t seen one another all summer. I assumed I’d at least get a hug?”

I slowly walked to her, hands moving around her back. Raven stared, trying to read my expression. My hands draped her lower back while her arms wrapped around my neck. I palmed the back of her head with one hand while the other remained around her waist, pulling her close.

I turned my head to smell her for the first time in months. Vanilla. An intoxicating smell. I wanted to smell more of it. I wanted to smell her hair, neck, pulse, and every part of her skin. I wanted to inhale her vanilla scent so deeply that it would imprint on me. I had been craving this for months—the smell of my infatuation.

It took a simple hug to break the dam I had built to keep out my desire for her. I confirmed what I had known all summer—what I refused to admit even to myself—I couldn't let her go. Not now. Not ever.

My heart hammered in fear she'd pull away, but Raven remained complacent. Jesus. She felt right in my arms. I wanted her. I wanted her so damn much—more than I had ever wanted anyone.

“I missed you, Raven.”

“I've missed you, too.”

I didn't expect her to respond readily. The certainty of attraction flowed between us, but there was the elephant in the room—my resentment and anger. The hell I went through this summer.

Before I could stop myself, I broke the spell by growling, “Then why did you leave like that?” I surprised both myself and Raven with the sheer volume of my voice.

NO, I almost shouted when Raven tried to jump out of my hold, surprised. My hands quickly tightened around her back, refusing to let go.

“I didn't mean to. I'm s-sorry,” Raven stammered.

“Sorry! That's all you have to say. I've been worried sick. Do you know how I've felt this entire summer?”

She told me she loved me. We kissed, then she left without warning and ignored me for months.

Raven was strong. No matter her feelings, she had enough self-restraint to do the right thing and tried to make the best decision for both of us. However, it didn't decrease my anger.

I looked down at her—bitter and lustful. Without warning, I grabbed her arms and pinned her to the wall. My body covered every inch of hers while I held her arms to her side.

“Why, Raven?” My voice reflected the turmoil inside me and the feeling of being torn apart.

Raven appeared shocked. “Milo, I...”

“Fuck!” All my anger from the summer came out, and I crushed my lips to hers. One of my hands fisted her hair, the other pinning down her wrists.

I slowly moved my mouth back from her soft lips. Raven seemed she didn't have a single coherent thought. She was speechless.

Good. Because I was still seething, and that wasn't nearly enough.

I slammed my lips back to hers and groaned before tilting my head. I finally did something I never had the chance to do. I pushed my tongue inside her mouth, giving her no choice but to open it for me.

Raven was frozen. She hadn't stopped me, but I could feel her holding back. I kept stroking her tongue aggressively, demanding she respond. Raven tentatively reciprocated, and I moaned as our tongues collided.

The kiss turned rough. I licked her bottom lip, then licked down her throat, groaning against her skin, “You taste so good.” I was breathing loudly, like a starved man taking in his last meal.

I panted against her neck, praying to divine intervention for control. I nibbled on her neck. A sensitive spot on her neck made Raven moan. She reflexively fisted my shirt and arched her back as I sucked hard enough to leave a mark.

I needed this, but it wasn't enough. It'd never be enough. I needed more, so much more. I grabbed her ass and lifted it, cueing her to wrap her legs around me. My mouth was devouring hers as I rubbed against her.

Suddenly, Raven froze. She stopped responding to my kisses. Tearing myself from her mouth, I leaned back to speculate. Her eyes were down, staring at where our groins were connected on top of our clothes. She could feel my hardness, which must have zapped her to reality.

The spell broke.

I slowly settled Raven on her feet. She didn't meet my eyes while I stared for a long moment, quietly studying her face. I fucked up. I shouldn't have kissed her. I just missed her so damn much I forgot my boundaries and reservations.

"I think I'm going to lie down. I'm exhausted from the flight." Raven grabbed her backpack and walked up the stairs, leaving her bigger suitcase behind.

I nodded, unable to form a sensible sentence. Classic Raven. She got overwhelmed with foreign emotions and needed a minute to gather herself. Over the years, Reid, Mia, and I had learned to give her space until she could sort shit out. She liked to compartmentalize and analyze situations at her speed. She didn't like confrontations, preferring flight over fight.

We could talk after she has had a chance to process it. At least she was running upstairs and not to another country.

Walking to the living room, I sat on the sofa and watched television. Turning my computer on, I worked on my app as well—anything to distract me.

After an hour, I was out of ideas and patience. I grabbed her suitcase and carried it up the stairs and to her room.

"Rave," I called, pushing the door open to step inside.

Silence. She was sprawled in the middle of the bed with a comforter thrown over.

How could she sleep after what happened?

I moved toward her and sat on the bed beside her unconscious body. I brushed my thumb over the apple of her cheek, entranced at the sight of her.

“Milo?” Raven’s eyes barely opened.

“Hey.”

“W-what’s going on?” Raven asked in a disoriented voice.

“I wanted to bring in your suitcase. Are you hungry? Want to come downstairs for dinner?” It was a silly request. What I wanted was to curl up in the bed with her.

Raven blinked. She looked ready to go back to sleep, her eyelids heavy.

“If you are still tired, you can keep sleeping.”

Against my better judgment, I trailed my fingers along the edge of her face down to her jaw. Raven drew in a shuddering breath. My hand moved to her arms, feeling her goosebumps.

I wanted to feel her in my arms. Fuck it. I was going to do it. Pulling a pillow, I leaned closer to lift her. Nudging a sleepy Raven onto my chest, I laid us against the pillow.

1 Mississippi. 2 Mississippi. No protests from Raven. Her eyes were closed once more, drifting back to sleep.

As she slept, my eyes moved over her face. Her red lips were slightly parted, the bottom one wet and jutting out. Her long lashes fanned her rosy cheeks. It seemed she took off her makeup in a rush before hitting the hay. Some of her mascara was smudged on her eyelids. Her hair was in disarray, sticking out from all ends.

She was strikingly beautiful.

I’d had sex with more women than I cared to count. Beautiful women. Tall, skinny, perfect complexions. Keeping with New York City traditions, they

presented themselves in well-put-together designer clothes. None of them held a candle to Raven when she dressed up.

However, when Raven stripped off her fancy clothes, she was a different type of beauty, unmeasurable to anyone in this world. With her tousled, messy hair, no makeup, and current vulnerability, Raven was a rare beauty found at the end of the world after a lifetime of searching. Her unique features made her one billion times more beautiful than any woman I had seen or been with. Her demeanor and composure only added to the allure. Raven didn't throw tantrums like most women I knew. She had a way of carrying herself in a classy, dignified manner.

She was my unicorn—one that lived in fantasies—a fantasy I could no longer go on without.

I was sure of our feelings for one another, but I was concerned about a change in relationship status between us. I was positive she was just as worried about the obstacles standing in our way. For years, those obstacles held me back. Right now, I couldn't remember why I cared in the first place. No man on this planet had wanted a girl as much as I wanted her. I was positive about this fact. Denying myself for the last few years had taken more effort than anything I had done.

It sucked. I had no idea what she was thinking, but I could no longer hold back. I wanted her. I needed to know she wanted me, too. Even if she didn't talk to me, I needed assurance. Against my better judgment, I leaned over and gently brushed my lips against hers.



Raven

My eyes flew open when I felt a firm pair of lips on mine. I stiffened.

Today had been a long day. I caught the first available flight from Paris, providing a measly excuse to Mom and Reid. Grabbing a taxi from the airport, I rushed home, ready to make amends with Milo.

It didn't go as planned.

First, Milo hugged me in more than a brotherly way. Out of nowhere, he pinned me to the wall and stared at me like I was his missing meal. He kissed the hell out of me. And then, I sensed Milo's arousal.

I had no idea what happened after. I sprinted to my room. Hastily, I took off my makeup, changed, and threw myself on the bed.

Maybe it was a dream or in my head. I felt guilty for ignoring Milo all summer while he had given me the most thoughtful gift. Maybe my brain conjured a sexual fantasy to create the intimacy I missed with him over the summer.

Not ready to face what had happened, I shut off my brain and went to sleep. The flight back had a long layover, taking over fifteen hours. I was exhausted. My tired mind was playing tricks on me, shading the lines between reality and fantasy.

However, this was real. I was sure of it.

Milo came into my room, asking about dinner. I could barely open my eyes. Then I felt a shift, with my head hitting Milo's chest. And now he was kissing me.

I had no idea how to take any of this. My world had stopped, my heart beating up to my ears.

Milo rolled me over. He was on his side with an arm banded around me, slowly returning to my mouth. I watched him with wide eyes, dumbfounded.

My brain screamed, STOP! But I didn't say it. I couldn't. This was Milo. How could I reject Milo, of all people?

Milo lowered his lips to mine. His hand was on my cheek, his upper body pressed tightly against mine. My head spun when Milo slipped his tongue inside my mouth. He devoured it, pulling me closer. He dropped his head to kiss my neck, biting a spot that made me moan. Upon hearing my vocalization, his eyes flared with a hunger I had never seen in a man.

He gently tugged at my shirt without taking it off, silently asking for permission with a questioning look as he held the hem of the shirt.

This was getting out of hand. I needed to say something, but I had lost my voice. I watched Milo peel my tank top over my chest, enough to expose my breasts. We stared at one another as it registered what we were doing.

Milo bent his head and took a nipple in his mouth, running his tongue over it. He maintained eye contact while giving the same treatment to my other breast. He returned to my mouth, his hands roaming me like he couldn't stop touching if he tried. His hands moved to my chest, waist, and finally, to the sleeping shorts I'd changed into earlier.

His fingers caressed the top of my shorts. I could feel myself getting wet as his lips moved to my pulse. There was a growing ache low in my stomach. Even if we should, I couldn't bring myself to stop. He was incredible at what he was doing.

Milo impatiently pulled my shorts down. He hadn't moved to touch my bare skin while I was impatient for contact. I couldn't wait for a second longer.

"Have you been with anyone before?" His husky voice startled me. Neither of us had spoken for so long; I forgot we could use our vocal cords to communicate.

I stared at him with a stupefied expression, then shook my head for a no. How could he ask the question so callously, as if asking for the time?

"Do you want me to stop?"

Hell no. Not anymore. I wanted relief, and I wanted it now.

I shook my head for a no again. I didn't care about his reasons anymore. I merely didn't want to break this spell.

"If you haven't been with anyone, we should wait," Milo murmured in my ear but followed up with an alternate solution. "We can do other things, but we can't go further than touching tonight."

With the fair warning, Milo's hand was on my sex. He rubbed my clit. I was so wet I could almost hear it. Moaning and thrashing, I only returned to focus when his hardness brushed against my leg. I glanced at Milo's erection straining through his pants.

Milo followed my gaze. I lifted my eyes. He was on his side with a hand propping up his head, the other caressing me.

Locking eyes with Milo was too intense, but I didn't know where else to look. Staring at his hand pleasuring me was awkward. Closing my eyes seemed impersonal. So instead, I perversely glanced back to his tented pants and the hardness lengthening against me.

Milo drew his fingers from my folds. Grabbing the hem of his shirt, he pulled it over his head. Milo continued to undress, undoing his belt buckle and unbuttoning his jeans. He lifted his hips to pull down his jeans, taking his boxers. His dick whipped out, and all I could do was stare.

Milo was naked. I couldn't stop staring. He was ripped. No fat. Solid muscle. Broad shoulders and chest.

Milo always had a nice body, but over the summer... damn! He had defined abs, and the veins on his arms stood out. He looked like what Channing Tatum and Ryan Gosling would look if they had a baby.

Women threw themselves at Milo. Beautiful women. Models. I had heard women pine over him. Women who were perfect tens. So, what was he doing with me?

Is he throwing me a bone out of pity because I told him I loved him?

Does he think fulfilling my fantasy is the only way I'll move on from my infatuation?

Or does the oldest, most desirable Sinclair want me?

I bulldozed through the questions and possibilities, realizing the last speculation was laughable. Though it was a flattering notion, someone like Milo would never be interested in me. He was a god among mortals, and I was some high school girl.

So, what was it he wanted from me?

Milo didn't do relationships. With his responsibilities—schoolwork, the new app, and household obligations—there was never enough time for a girlfriend. As a result, the extent of his romantic relationships were friends with benefits. Many of them wanted more, but it wasn't in the cards for Milo.

Being a good guy, Milo clarified as much to women before they chose to pursue him. He'd never steer anyone wrong or misguide them. Which meant he wouldn't do it to me, either.

Once more, Milo was on his side with his head propped up by his elbow. He studied me quietly, eyes moving over my face. He trailed his fingers to my shorts, making me jump from the sudden movement.

"It's okay, baby. I just want to touch you," he whispered.

Baby?

What were we doing? I almost formed a word but couldn't spit it out. Milo made me feel like a petulant child, one who should always do as he said.

His fingers slipped between my folds, and I whimpered, eyes rolling to the back of my head. I was a blank canvas with no more thoughts—a Tabula Rasa. Nothing existed except for those fingers.

"Baby, touch me while I touch you."

I should say no, but my usual backbone had exited the building. Milo was acting with so much confidence it left no room for arguments. He seemed so sure I would have followed him to hell had he asked.

And it felt like I just did.

My hands moved between us and down his body. We were both lying on our sides, facing one another. I ran my index finger down his length, feeling his size. I felt Milo holding his breath as my hand traced him. There was a low groan, but otherwise, he held still while I explored.

Eventually, my trembling fingers closed around his dick.

I had given Michel a few hand jobs over the summer, but my limited experience had left me. Luckily, Milo guided me, whispering instructions.

“Hold me tighter. Stroke me up and down.” He gave out another restrained growl. “Yes, just like that.”

He fixed his gaze on me, and I felt his effort to maintain control.

“Cup my balls with your other hand,” he hissed. Milo panted, covering my face and neck with kisses. “God, that feels so fucking good.” His breathing turned ragged, and his pupils dilated.

All the while, he was focused enough to continue his assault on me. I could barely follow the instructions, distracted by his fingers. I tried to cup his balls, squeezing and pumping with both hands. Simultaneously, Milo increased the tempo on my clit. Before long, I was chasing an orgasm.

Suddenly, Milo groaned, “Fuck, baby.”

His warm cum landed on my hands and legs. I didn’t have the chance to react before he did something that had my back arching. I tried to scream, but my voice was stuck in my throat.

I couldn’t pay attention and fell back on my pillow. I had dissipated from reality, unaware of my body and movements.

From a distance, I heard the bathroom door creak. A few moments later, I felt something wet on my legs. I peeked to find Milo wiping off the semen with a washcloth. I vaguely watched as he put on boxers after throwing the washcloth into my dirty hamper. Milo adjusted my top and shorts before stretching out on the bed with his head in the hollow of my neck. A little of his weight was me, but most of it was on the side, so it wasn’t entirely uncomfortable. His warm body weight, combined with the post-orgasm high, was far too relaxing. My eyes closed as we drifted off.



Raven

I woke the next day, disoriented.

What the hell.

I was on my side with Milo's arms wrapped around me.

We... oh, God.

My world came crashing down.

I didn't have time to think. Milo was fast asleep, and I didn't want to be here when he woke up. I untangled myself and moved off the bed.

Tiptoeing, I changed my clothes and found my shoes, purse, and phone. I turned the knob quietly and slipped out, not bothering to close the door. I dashed downstairs, grasping at the nearest wall to steady myself. I was a mix of confusion and shame, trying to piece it together.

What the hell happened last night? What overcame Milo, and what possessed me?

There were opportunities to stop. He would have respected my choice had I told him to stop. I wasn't weak. I had said no to plenty of boys before. So, why didn't I say no? I just gaped at him like an idiot. By the time my senses returned, he'd built up my orgasm. At that point, I would have begged him to keep going, not the other way around.

What would people say if they found out I did that with the guy who signed my report cards and chaperoned my school dances? We'd turn into a Woody Allen joke.

I couldn't tell Reid; he'd be pissed. Thou shalt not covet your BFF's brother. Reid gave me his blessing to be close to Milo again, but I doubted he meant that close.

Not to mention the most taboo reason of all. The law recognized that man as my legal parent. This was sick.

Maybe we were both overwhelmed by our emotions when we saw each other. I was sad about our distance and how I had treated him. He was angry about the way I left. Emotions were running high and exploded in epic

proportions. It was a mistake—a misunderstanding. Even Milo was allowed one mistake.

Yes, he made a mistake. As did I. But we could fix it. We must.

Milo would know how to proceed. I could always count on him to pick up the pieces. For now, I had to compartmentalize away what had happened. If I didn't, my brain might fry from over-analysis.

I needed to get out of this house and find my bearings. I texted Janeen, one of my good friends from school, asking to catch up. It was about eight a.m. She was the only teenager who'd be up at this hour during summer vacation as she had swim meets in the mornings.

Janeen texted me back right away, agreeing to grab breakfast. I sighed a relief and sprinted out of the house, needing immense distance from my place of residence.



Milo

I woke to an empty bed, the high from last night dissipating. I knocked on her bathroom door, hoping to speak to Raven.

No response.

Heading downstairs, I searched for her and called her name. Again, no response.

You've got to be kidding me. Raven had flown the nest again. She freaked out; I could feel it. The last time we kissed, she admitted to loving me then fled the country.

What if she ran again?

Anxiety paralyzed me at the thought. I couldn't go through a repeat of this summer. I never wanted to experience that again. I had to find her and calm her down.

My mind was reeling over how to move forward. I knew what we meant to one another. No other woman had looked at me the way she did. She was the only person for me. She could see through me to my very soul.

For so long, we put a pin on our feelings. I was her parental figure, the one who was supposed to hold back. Yet, I initiated it last night. I should have exercised more self-control.

It was a constant battle—my obsession versus what was right. After last night, my obsession was winning. She was responsive as well, which didn't help.

Grabbing my phone, I fired up a text.

Milo: Where are you?

Rave: Grabbing breakfast with Janeen.

What was wrong with this girl, running away whenever she didn't want to deal with emotion?

I waited for her return as the hours went by. Hours of absolute torture. Hours of giving her space. Hours of waiting until I couldn't take it any longer. Was this how she felt when she pined after me for years, and I had to ignore her feelings?

I wanted her but couldn't act on it. I still shouldn't, but the barrier had broken. I couldn't go back. I should feel like a piece of shit, but my desire was pushing my honor code right out the door. The thoughts kept me wound tight as I busied myself for the remainder of the day. By eight pm, I was beyond frustrated.

Fuck that. I was pissed. After a summer of running and avoiding me, Raven was doing the same shit again. I didn't expect this from Raven. I never considered our age difference a barrier. I considered the rest of our issues, but never this.

Raven played the role of a diplomat in our household, placating tense situations. Even my friends sought out her for advice. I thought she was

mature for her age, but recently, her inexperience in life was showing. This wasn't the way to handle things.

I glanced at my phone for the hundredth time, hoping for a call. A text. Anything.

I threw my phone across the room and only got angrier when it landed on the carpet. I needed to hear the noise of shattering. In fact, I wanted everything to shatter. I wanted to destroy everything. My house. My possessions. My siblings' possessions. I wanted to be surrounded by chaos and darkness, the way I felt on the inside.

I breathed heavily and touched my chest, where a budding constriction built. My anxiety grew. An impending panic attack was around the corner, and the only person who could calm me was nowhere in sight. Biting down my ego, I picked up the phone and sent her another text.

Milo: You need to come home.

Rave: Is everything ok?

I shook from pent-up anger.

Milo: Come home. NOW!

Rave: Why?

Milo: Because I said so.

Rave: You are scaring me. What's going on?

Was she kidding? It had been months of the same crap, and she was asking me what was going on. She was fucking with my head, and I was over it.

Milo: Please don't argue. Just come home.

Rave: Ok



Raven

I stared at my phone. Milo had never spoken to me like a strict parent before. Reid and I enjoyed our freedom so long as we followed his rules.

Milo sometimes scolded Reid regarding his questionable decisions but praised me for my responsible outlook. He trusted me to make the right decisions and treated me like an equal.

So, what the hell was that?

Janeen and I did nothing out of the ordinary on our vacation day. We had breakfast, went to a movie, window-shopped, and ended the day by grabbing dinner at a cafe near my house. We were ready to wrap up when Milo hit me with his tornado of demands.

I reminded myself that Milo had every right. He set the rules in my life, and I didn't want to fight with him. After what happened this summer, I shouldn't have left this morning. It was unfair. He was confused, too, and we needed to figure it out.

Plus, Mia was due home soon. She hated it when there was negativity or tension in the household. She could sense when something was off, even if no words had been spoken. If we didn't sort out our shit, it'd fuck with her head. She was already angry at me for leaving abruptly. It took weeks of texting and calling to get back in her good graces. I didn't want to rock the boat.

Not to mention, Milo was overwhelmed by the piled-up load of responsibilities. His anxiety took over at times, resulting in panic attacks. Perhaps it was the reason for the urgent texts. Maybe Milo had another attack.

Fuck. I needed to go home.

I grabbed my bag and forked over some cash, apologizing to Janeen about running off abruptly. Hugging her goodbye, I promised to call the next day.

Walking home in record time, I threw my purse on the floor and dashed to Milo's room, pushing the door open. He was sitting on the bed. Both his hands were intertwined at the back of his head, looking down.

“Milo, are you okay?”

Milo’s head snapped up. His breathing was heavy, eyes bloodshot. I had seen that look before. He was spiraling.

“Shit. Are you having a panic attack?” I reached for him. “Do you want me to count down?”

I had helped him through many of these episodes and knew the routine. Sometimes he’d calm down by counting backward from ten. Sometimes it was a breathing technique. At desperate times, drugs did the trick.

Milo’s panic attacks were generally triggered by stress. Particularly stress over Mia and Reid. Something told me I was the trigger this time.

Fuck. He had been worried about me. Perhaps he felt guilty about last night. He shouldn’t; I was just as responsible. He didn’t force me into anything. I had plenty of opportunities to stop him. I should’ve talked to him. Instead, I ran and caused him to have a panic attack. I was a piece of shit.

“Milo, can you talk to me?”

He said nothing.

“Milo? What—?” I gasped as he stood and erupted out of nowhere.

“What’s the matter with you? You think you can keep leaving, and I’ll keep letting it go?” His voice shook with rage, breathing ragged. Before I could respond, Milo grabbed my arms. “Why are you doing this to me, Rave?”

“I’m sorry,” was all I could muster.

“No, Rave. That doesn’t cut it anymore,” Milo yelled. “I thought you, of all people, wouldn’t cause me stress. Instead of talking to me, you run. I have no fucking idea what’s going through your head. Do you know how hard that’s been for me?”

My chest tightened, feeling overwhelmed with guilt. Guilt over leaving him this summer. Guilt over leaving today. He was a human with the weight of the world on his shoulders, and I made him worry about me. I’d vowed never to do that.

“I-I didn’t mean to... I’m sorry.”

“Stop saying that. I never expected you to behave this way. I expected you to act more mature. I am so disappointed in you. In all of this. I thought we —” Milo shook his head. “You know what? Just leave. That’s what you do best.”

My knees almost gave out from the words.

I am so disappointed in you.

His words rang in my ears as tears sprung to my eyes. It was my worst fear and insecurity where Milo was concerned. The day I moved into this house, I promised to never be the cause of his stress. I wanted to be his support system like he was mine. After everything he had done for me, I had become Milo’s source of anguish and anxiety.

“Please stop,” I whispered. “Me leaving had nothing to do with you and everything to do with me.” I put a hand on his cheek, knowing it soothed him.

Milo closed his eyes. He covered my hand with one of his own. Still in full panic mode, he breathed heavily to catch oxygen.

“Do you want me to grab one of your pills?”

“No.”

I stroked his cheeks with both hands. He pulled my hands from his cheeks, holding them tight. “Okay. What do you need then?”

“I only need you right now.”

I looked at him for a long moment, wondering if I was reading too much into it or if he meant... he couldn’t mean... could he?

I tested the water. “Okay. Talk to me. What do you need me to do?”

“Be here with me,” Milo whispered and showed me what he wanted. Turning my palm, he kissed my pulse and trailed his lips to my arms. He couldn’t be more explicit, but I didn’t understand why he needed me this

way all of a sudden. Why had the dynamics of our relationship changed so abruptly?

I was caught off guard by Milo's actions, but I couldn't deny him. Not when he was crumbling. Not when I was the source of his current anguish.

I recalled the day Milo moved me to this house. My father was so absent-minded that he forgot to pay the utility bill and left me in a house with no electricity. My phone was dead, and there were no adults in the house. What if an intruder had broken in? I could have been raped, abducted, or killed.

If it weren't for Milo, all those things could have happened. My negligent parents would've been none the wiser. They still hadn't checked in to ensure I safely made it to New York. At least I was almost an adult now. Back then, I was a scared kid. A proud little kid.

Milo broke through to me and taught me it was okay to ask for help, taking on the burden of being responsible for another person at a young age. The paperwork alone must have been excruciating. He didn't have to take me in or become my guardian at eighteen.

So, perhaps I could do this for him.

Like I did with everything in life, I needed to compartmentalize and focus on one objective. My objective was to "fix" Milo because he sure as hell looked broken. I needed to create and catalog a few justifications in my mind, or I might back down. I internally identified a list of reasons to go through with this.

Reason one: Experience. I could gain experience with someone I trust since the extent of my sexual history was limited to a few blowjobs and hand jobs with Michel.

Reason two: Sexual satisfaction. Piggybacking off my last point, I was never into exploring with Michel, but I might be into it with Milo. If I believed the gossip, he was good at physical acts. My personal sexual experiences with him thus far were reflective of the same.

Reason three: Sexual empowerment. I wasn't into slut-shaming. I didn't judge others or have a code of principles for sex. Granted, my current motivation was based on guilt and feeling indebted to Milo. But for the first time in our relationship, he needed my help. It was oddly empowering.

Reason four: Curiosity. I hadn't explored the sexual realm because sex never appealed to me. Maybe I needed a push in that direction.

My decision was made by the time Milo's lips were on my neck.

Before I lost my nerve, I unbuckled Milo's belt, unbuttoned his jeans, and pulled down his zipper. In a swift move, I reached inside to pull out his dick. Dropping to my knees, I swirled my tongue around the tip and closed my mouth over his cock.

"Fuck, Rave!" Milo sounded bewildered. "Oh, God, baby. Oh shit," Milo groaned loud enough to be heard in Jersey.

It happened so fast that my actions didn't register with Milo until my mouth was on his dick. One of his hands landed in my hair, tugging restlessly to let me know what he liked.

"Baby, stop," he suddenly groaned. His breathing was still harsh, but for a different reason. I had distracted him from the panic attack. "I'm going to come in your mouth if you don't stop."

I lifted my head as Milo pulled me to stand. His expression changed from lust to a weird look I couldn't identify. He frowned, before narrowing his eyes.

"Where did you learn that?" He sounded surprised.

I was unsure if I should tell him about Michel. Wasn't there a cardinal rule about not discussing other men during intimate moments? I remained quiet.

"Raven, I asked you a question."

"Umm—"

"You said you haven't been with anyone before."

“Yes, I haven’t had sex before.”

“But you have done that. With someone else.”

It was a statement, not a question. So, I didn’t answer.

Milo’s eyes flared. “With whom?”

“A guy I dated.”

“You brought a guy here and sucked him off a few doors from where I sleep?” Milo’s voice shook. I had never heard him so angry.

I was instantly taken aback. Milo grabbed my arm, refusing to let go until I answered.

Milo was only twenty. It wasn’t that long ago when he was seventeen. He must know teenagers in this city were sexually active. He had caught Reid with girls in his room. At least I was a virgin. I didn’t know any virgins my age. Milo was no saint, either, with his extensive list. His sexual history started earlier than seventeen.

However, I had never seen Milo bring a girl to his room. He disapproved of Reid’s behavior, and it wasn’t the precedent he wanted to set. He insisted on limiting debauchery to the separate apartment downstairs.

“No. I have never brought anyone here.” I clarified. I wouldn’t be so disrespectful as to bring a hookup around our sleeping quarters and risk exposing Mia to the behavior.

“Where then?”

What the hell. Was he serious? I wouldn’t dare ask Milo about his history, nor would he answer. “It was... umm... at his place. This was in Paris.”

Milo leaned back as if I had struck him. “What the fuck did you say?” he growled, his fingers digging painfully into my bicep. “This whole summer, you were too busy to answer my calls because you were on your knees blowing assholes?”

This time I did manage to rip out of his hold. Milo had never spoken to me this way. I didn't know what to think and gaped at him. This wasn't him. Milo spoke rationally, and when angry, he generally had a point.

Did he have a point?

I assessed it from his perspective to play devil's advocate.

From Milo's perspective, he gave me a thoughtful and meaningful gift: a trip to Paris to further my future in fashion design. In turn, I didn't bother checking with him before leaving. I ignored him for months, saying I was busy working at Mom's store. Instead, he found out I was dating, having fun, and getting semi-physical.

It was clear to him I wasn't too busy. I was having fun while he was worried about me. If the tables were turned, I'd be upset, too. I wouldn't have verbalized it the way he did. However, I decided against focusing on that.

I tried for plain honesty instead. "Look, I didn't know the Paris trip was a pre-planned gift. After the night of my party, I-I was embarrassed about what I said," I admitted quietly.

This was also the perfect moment to clear up the I love you debacle. Milo had an ego. All men of his caliber did. It couldn't sound like rejection, so I worded it carefully.

"I know you didn't read into it, but then I saw the Paris itinerary the next morning. I thought you were trying to get rid of me because you were irritated by what I said."

Milo seemed surprised, but a realization flickered on his face as if putting together the answers to a puzzle.

Relieved to see his anger subsiding, I continued, "I really was busy working all summer. Through work, I met this boy, Michel. We dated casually and later decided to be just friends. I wanted to try dating. It seemed like what I said to you was misunders—"

I didn't get to finish. Milo charged at me with a new rage and determination. He had the same lust-crazed expression as after my return from Paris. His mouth came crashing down. Hard. One of his hands held my nape. His pants were already undone. He stepped out of them while unclasping and tugging my pants down.

I couldn't focus. My head spun with his tongue exploring my mouth lewdly. I didn't realize he had picked me up and dropped me on his bed.

With his forehead to mine, Milo whispered, "It doesn't matter. I forgive you. Let's forget about it."

Impatiently, he pulled his shirt over his head and slipped my shoes off, skimming his hand over my thong. He took off my thong and tossed it aside, moving toward my lower body.

"Right now, I just want to taste you," he breathed against my inner thighs.

I softly moaned as his tongue flicked out. A little too eagerly, he took hold of my thighs and guided my legs over his shoulders.

He groaned, "God, you taste so good. Even better than I imagined."

He ran his tongue along my inner lips, kissing and licking before taking a gentle bite. I was nothing but a machine making gasping and moaning noises.

Milo stopped abruptly.

No, I mentally screamed.

He grinned at my disappointed face, grabbing my arms to pull me up. Sitting at the edge of the bed, he repositioned me to sit on his lap. Milo worked on taking off my shirt and bra, then scooted to lie down while I straddled his stomach. When he yanked on my hips, I had no choice but to move forward. He tugged at me harder until I stumbled onto his chest. Grabbing my hips, Milo lifted me until my pussy was mere inches from his mouth, ready to ride his face.

He placed a gentle kiss. His skilled tongue started at the bottom and swiped up. I gasped with my fingers tightly gripping his hair as his tongue flicked my nub. This position was too much, and I was gone within seconds. My thighs shook around his head. He was giving me no option but to explode.

“Shit. Shit. Oh, God, Milo,” I panted, fully riding his face now.

He licked me everywhere, nipping, tasting, devouring me. He was so deep inside that I felt his tongue against my walls. He gripped my hips to pull me down, his teeth grazing my entrance.

“Oh, fuck.” I choked on my scream as my movements halted. My thighs quaked, and my body convulsed as I came on his mouth.

Milo lowered me, turning me to my back. I trembled, unable to breathe. He kissed my breasts, stomach, and chest, making his way up until his naked body covered mine. He dove and took one of my nipples in his mouth, sucking and nibbling. His hand slid up my ass and pulled my slick pussy closer, caressing the sensitive clit with the head of his cock. The friction was incredible, with his dick stroking the right spot. My pussy pulsed, and my core ached. I was soaked, and I bet the bedsheets were, too. My nails scratched his back. He was going to make me come again.

My body tightened as I mashed my teeth. My head knocked back, and suddenly I cried as ecstasy coursed through me once more.

Lying sloppily on the mattress, I went limp, gulping for oxygen. I was spent, but Milo wasn't done. With his mouth on mine, he grabbed his cock and settled it against my opening.

“Baby, I want to fuck you so bad.”

I tensed.

Milo also realized what he was about to do. He latched onto the inside of my thighs, reining himself in. He lifted slightly off me.

“We can wait if you're not ready,” he hurriedly added, eyes searching mine.

I said nothing as Milo stared with a desperate, unspoken plea.

I didn't make the mental preparations to have sex today. I thought we would do more of what we had been doing thus far, but I should have clarified. I'd already allowed the guy to rub his dick there. It would be blue-balled level painful if I asked him to stop now.

Milo looked ready to lose it from impatience but didn't rush my response. He was waiting for permission. I wrapped my arms around his waist to bring him back. The immense relief on his face was instant.

Milo knew I was on birth control for my period cramps. He was the one who took me to the doctor and picked them up for me. My concern was the notches on his belt.

"I am clean," he murmured, reading my mind. I held my breath, knowing it might hurt. Again, Milo spoke on cue, "Baby, this is going to hurt."

No shit, Sherlock. Milo was so big I could barely fit him in my mouth. This was bound to hurt more than the average allocated amount.

He stroked my hair, planting comforting kisses over my face. "If you tense, it'll only hurt more. Try to relax and let me in. I promise to be gentle. If it's too much, tell me. I can stop."

I nodded.

Slowly and gently, he moved into me without entering. Instead, he rubbed his dick up and down my sex. I tried to relax my muscles, breathing in and out. Milo twirled his tongue around my pulse, making me moan while at the same moment he slipped a little inside me.

My relaxation vanished. I had no pain threshold whatsoever and grabbed onto his shoulders in agony. Ouch.

"It'll be worse if I keep inching in. Breathe. Focus on me. I'm here."

I was about to tell him to stop when Milo slammed inside.

"Ow. Ow. Ow. Fuck!" I whimpered like a hurt feral animal. I knew it might be painful but holy motherfucker. My insides were burning. My face scrunched up, and I clawed his shoulders hard enough to leave scratches.

"I am so sorry, baby." Milo had a genuinely distressed look on his face. "There's no way around the pain. Try to relax. It'll hurt less if you do."

He held still, letting me get used to his size. Milo dropped more gentle kisses on my face and neck. He whispered the sweetest words in my ears, distracting me from the uncomfortable foreign sensations.

"You are so beautiful."

"You blow my mind."

"You are so talented."

"I am in awe of you, Raven."

"I have never met anyone like you."

Suddenly, I was glad it was him. Another guy wouldn't have known to give me this assurance to distract me from the physical discomfort. Although I was a baby about pain, Milo knew I was also a sucker for his compliments. It distracted me from the sting. I forgot about the burning sensation and moaned when he sucked on my ear lobe.

"Baby, I'm going to move. Tell me to stop if it's too much," he reminded.

"Okay," I barely choked out, dreading it.

He pulled back a little. My walls burnt as he moved. Ouch. Ouch. Ouch.

Milo gently slid back, studying my face. He waited and repeated. From the anguished expression, I could tell he was doing everything in his power to hold back. After a few moments, he found a rhythm. His crescendo was visibly building. Soon, he looked too far gone, breathing and panting heavily. He didn't want to hold back but was controlling himself.

Reid and I had watched porn like we did everything together. I had seen enough to know a guy sped up while climaxing during sex.

I slid my arms around Milo's neck, pulling him closer to encourage him. Milo increased his tempo as I braced myself by putting my head in the hollow of his neck. I wanted him to finish, but he might not if he saw my

agony. I dug my nails in his biceps as painful tears seeped out of my eyes. After a few thrusts, Milo fisted my hair as his body clamped down.

“Fuck,” Milo roared.

A warmth spread inside, and I realized he came inside me. Another thing we should’ve discussed earlier.

Milo pulled out and collapsed on top. One of his hands remained wrapped around my waist. He breathed on my cheek, absentmindedly kissing me every so often.

I had never felt so close to Milo. Did the aftereffect of sex bring people this level of intimacy? I was unsure of what we had done, but a sick part of me, the one that craved his attention, was happy for the closeness. One that could only be attained physically.

Milo eventually stirred and kissed me on the neck. He shifted and pulled my back to his front.

“Are you okay?”

“Yep.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded.

“I have never experienced anything like that,” he murmured in my hair. “It was the only thing that could’ve calmed me down today. Thank you.” He kissed my temple. “You are amazing.” He grabbed my hand and kissed each of my fingers.

“I am?” Ugh! Yes, I heard it. I was fishing for compliments. I just gave up my virginity. Did I expect him to say that I was not amazing? I needed to see a therapist.

“You are and so much more.” He kissed my cheek. “I know it wasn’t the same for you. I know it hurt. It’ll be uncomfortable the first few times, but I promise sex will become mind-blowing.”

I blinked.

I was under the impression that this was a one-time deal because he was freaking out. I should have known better. Milo didn't engage in one-night stands. He was paranoid about catching diseases from random hookups. At least the little reminder put my mind at ease.

Plus, Milo believed one-night stands didn't result in good sex. People needed time to learn how to play each other's bodies like a marionette. Or so I had heard from his groupies.

If Milo did meet someone he was attracted to, he let them know he could only offer friendship or casual dating with no strings attached. They engaged in a mutually beneficial relationship resulting in sexual satisfaction. Once either of them got bored—which usually meant once Milo was bored—they ended the physical aspect and remained friends. He expected the same of me.

My heart sank.

At the very least, I thought my sick desire for closeness with Milo was being fulfilled through sex. I felt special, knowing only I got to experience this level of intimacy with him. I didn't even get that.

Milo had shared this post-orgasm closeness with lots of women. Some of them were his closest friends. He wanted me in the same way he wanted them. Friendship with sex, and then back to being friends. He'd leave me as soon as he was done with me. Nothing about it made me special to him or different from the others.

I was so stupid. I gave up my virginity in an unsure moment. I broke Reid's trust, I didn't feel closer to Milo, and my vagina hurt so much I wanted to rip it out.

Milo's eyes grew heavy. My own were tearing up from the rampant emotions. Maybe that's why people didn't give up their virginity or take sex lightly. Sex complicated things because the physical affects the emotional. I wished I'd waited until I was sure. Sex was bringing up a vulnerability I had never experienced.

I tried to scoot away and return to my room.

Milo's hold tightened. "Where're you going?"

"To my room."

"No."

"No?"

"Sleep here with me," he stated as a finality. Softly kissing my temple, he dragged me back into his arms.

"Um. I want to take a shower and get in my PJs. I also want to call my parents."

"My bathroom has everything you need for a shower." Milo pointed at his bathroom door. "You can sleep in my boxers and a t-shirt or any of my other clothes." He pointed to his dresser. "My phone has an international plan if you want to call your parents." He pointed at his phone.

I didn't bother verbalizing the real reason I shouldn't sleep here. Reid didn't share his flight details. He was coming home at some point tomorrow. He'd throw a fit if he discovered us together in the morning.

Milo turned me to my back. His gaze roamed my face as if searching for a response. He could feel my defiance resonating through my body language.

"We are sleeping together," he clarified. "Either here or in your room."

I wondered if this was about his bruised ego. It didn't make sense. Since my return, I have met a different Milo. Someone borrowing his skin, his shell. The insides and personalities were entirely different. Milo was self-sacrificing and prioritized others. He'd never hurt Reid's feelings out of pride.

"We can sleep here," I sighed.

If he weren't giving me a choice, I'd rather sleep here. There were six bedrooms in this house. After his parents left, Milo took the master

bedroom, which stood on the farthest side of the house. It was the most private.

“Good.” Milo kissed my shoulder. “I’ll join you if you still want to take that shower.”

Dread built inside me. I did want to take a shower. I was sticky, and pretty sure I bled. But something told me Milo expected sex with his proposal for a shower. The thought kept me pinned to the bed.

“I’m kind of tired now. Can I get a shirt to sleep in?”

Milo rose and brought me a sleeping shirt long enough to go down to my thighs. I put it on and headed to the bathroom to clean what I could without showering.

Milo stood by the bed, naked. His eyes were fixed on me as I marched to the bathroom. When I turned to close the door, I caught his gaze—dark, lustful eyes, looking unbelievably hungry, raked over me.

I hurriedly closed the bathroom door, not giving him a chance to open Pandora's box again. Suddenly, I wanted nothing more than to sleep in my bed, away from Milo. And around midnight, that’s precisely what I did.

Milo was asleep when I tip-toed back. He had been on edge since my return. I doubted this defiance would help the situation. However, I did give up my virginity to the only man I shouldn’t have. I was an emotional wreck and in physical pain. I had earned myself the right to take a hot shower alone, sleep in my own clothes, and in my own damn bed.



Milo

I woke without that beautiful girl in my arms. Again.

I didn’t need the lights to feel Raven’s missing warmth. Blinking rapidly, I oriented myself to gather my wits.

Memories of last night washed over me. A smile formed on my lips. Raven lost her virginity to me. We experienced a moment of perfect togetherness—just her and I. The way it was always supposed to be.

I didn't plan for us to have sex last night. When I said to her I needed her, I meant being with her, holding her, feeling her close. But after she told me about some guy in Paris, it snapped me out of my noble intentions. The moment she admitted to blowing some fucker in Paris, I threw caution to the wind. Pure animal instincts took over as if needing to fill my female mate with my seed. I dragged her to bed with a need to mark myself on her.

Anger coursed through me at the thought of her with that asshole. She told me she loved me. We kissed. Then she left without talking to me and blew some guy in Europe while I was pining after her.

She hurt me. Bad.

I told her I forgave her. In turn, she left me in the middle of the night.

I slammed my hand against the mattress. I found myself irritated, aggravated, and angry once more. I was furious with Raven for avoiding conflict. I was mad at myself for having no control left when it came to her. I was supposed to be taking care of her, not fucking her. Most of all, I was angry Raven had hooked up with some douchebag in Paris. Imagining her with another man entirely fucked up my mood from last night's bliss.

Why did I think she was responsible enough to visit Paris with an absentee parent like Theresa?

I was her age only a few years ago. I knew what went through a seventeen-year-old's mind. All those hormones. I gave Raven too much credit by thinking she was above it.

I was landing in a pile of jealousy. Unable to help myself, I took out my phone. I had forced myself not to stalk her on social media while she was in Paris, but now, it was no holds barred. I went through the photos on her Facebook page from over the summer. It didn't take long to find the Michel fucker with his arms draped around Raven. Around MY Raven.

This was three weeks ago. Jesus, I was about to lose it. She was blowing this douchebag only three weeks ago. Fuck.

I looked at his profile. He was my age, which meant he was experienced. She put her mouth on his dick. I should have been the first one she did that to. The only one, in fact. He took what was fucking mine.

I tossed the phone on the bed and laid flat with an arm thrown over my face, beyond livid. I reasoned with myself. I had given Raven an open-ended ticket after she confessed to loving me. It wasn't irrational for her to think I was trying to get rid of her because I couldn't handle her feelings. Dating other people was supposed to be the right decision. We were both supposed to move on during the summer.

Except I didn't move on. I couldn't even look at another girl. Raven obviously had no problems in that department.

Raven should've spoken to me before making these assumptions. Instead, she blew me off while literally blowing that asshole. We had a long list of reasons why we shouldn't be together. Now I had to add trust issues to the list.

Despite pointing out the flaws of being together, I knew none of these reasons would stop me. After last night, my obsession had risen to a new level. I got a taste of what I had been craving for years, and now, I had become a madman. Last night, it took everything in me not to follow her into the bathroom and fuck her again. I couldn't let her find another douchebag and move on. She must feel the same. Raven wasn't a pushover. I had seen her say no to plenty of men. She wouldn't have given up her virginity if she didn't feel the same uncontrollable pull.

I glanced at the clock. It was five a.m. I didn't know when she snuck back, but I wasn't giving her the chance to avoid me all day again. We needed to talk.

I remained in bed, contemplating what to do. When I saw the sun, I threw on a T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants. The house was eerily quiet as I walked to the kitchen to make breakfast before heading to Raven's room.

Trying my best to sound normal, I called out from outside her bedroom door. “Rave, I made breakfast.”

“Oh, okay. Thanks. Be right there.”

I sighed in relief. At least she was here.

Raven walked in while I was setting the kitchen table. She looked freshly showered and breathtaking in a casual white tank top with sweatpants. The outfit did more for me than the high-end lingerie girls had thrown my way in the past.

“Coffee?”

“Sure.”

I poured two cups of coffee as Raven stacked eggs and pancakes onto our plates. I watched her from the corner of my eye, her expression unreadable.

I kept the conversation light. “I heard the fashion show in Paris went well. You are a big-shot designer now. Are you going to remember us, peasants, when you are at the top?”

“Big shot? I think I am a micro-shot at best.” She sounded casual, trying for humor.

“Everyone needs a start. Do you get recognition as the designer of the dress?”

“Mom said I get a small royalty for any of the It’s So Raven dress sales.”

“Hah! So, you are a big-shot designer,” I continued our banter. I didn’t know if my voice matched my nerves. “Will you take me on a fancy date now that you are a baller?”

“Umm—” Raven tucked her hair behind her ear.

I switched gears as she acted uncomfortable. “Did your mom like any of your other designs?”

Raven took a sip of her coffee in between devouring her food. “No, I haven’t shown her any other ones.”

“How come?”

“It never crossed my mind.”

“You should.”

Raven nodded without looking up.

“Did you call your mom to tell her you arrived safely?”

“Yeah, but she didn’t pick up.”

“And Uncle John?”

“I called him, too. He has a virtual assistant now who deals with his messages. She said he would return my call after work.”

“Reid mentioned you went to see him this summer. How was the visit to South Africa?”

“It was incredible and eye-opening. Dad helps a lot of people. And he was really attentive to me throughout the visit.”

I didn’t respond. I loved Uncle John, but he had failed his daughter. He had shown no interest in Raven’s well-being in the last four years. I’d hate for her to get her hopes up after only one visit.

As if sensing my apprehension, Raven preemptively defended her father. “And when I returned to Paris, he called me regularly. He has been great lately.”

I nodded but said nothing otherwise. I didn’t have the heart to tell Raven that Uncle John called her frequently because she was near Theresa. He had a weird obsession with his ex-wife. It was ironic because I had a weird obsession with his daughter. That was why it angered me that he made his only daughter feel unwanted.

Raven munched on another forkful of pancakes. Thoughts of Uncle John disappeared as I stared at her perfect mouth. As if she could sense the change in my thoughts, Raven pushed away her plate and sprung to her feet.

“I am going back to sleep. Still jet-lagged. Can I help you clean up later?”

“Don’t worry about it. I can clean up. Go sleep.”

I stared behind Raven. She was a flight risk and clearly uncomfortable discussing what was happening between us.

As for myself, I didn’t need to process. I could barely think rationally, shaking with my need for her. After last night, I no longer knew what was right and wrong.

Well, I did, but I wasn’t sure it would stop me.

The rest of the day passed in a blur. I met with Asher, Jaci, Alexa, and Brandon to discuss our next investor meetings. I wrapped up and returned home by five p.m. The door to Raven’s room was closed. It seemed she had stayed cooped up all day.

I whipped up dinner and waited as long as I could before heading to her room. I gave her space all day—breathing room, time to think about it. I had been patient, especially after what I went through this summer. I couldn’t stay away anymore.

“Rave!” I pushed her door open.

“Yeah?” Raven was sitting at her desk, fumbling with her phone. She wasn’t in bed but didn’t seem lucid or ready to take on the day. She had on her sleeping shorts with a tank top.

“I made dinner. Have you eaten since breakfast?”

“No. I didn’t realize it got so late.”

“Have you been in bed all day?” I waved toward her bed, wondering why I hadn’t stayed in bed with her.

Raven glanced at me. "I tried but couldn't sleep. I have been trying to get in touch with Dad. The calls aren't connecting."

I said nothing, though I wanted to. In this scenario, it was best to remain quiet.

My eyes were fixed on her as Raven walked to the charging dock, presumably to charge her phone. The gentle sway of her hip and the way she walked was captivating. I couldn't stop watching her. Couldn't stop wanting to be near her. To smell her. Cover her with my scent.

I moved without direction until I stood behind her. She turned and found herself locked in a staring contest with me.

Raven gave nothing away with her expression. I brushed the hair out of her face, fingers lingering as I played with the strands. Other thoughts evaporated, and she was all that remained.

Before she could react, I pulled her close and sealed my mouth over hers. She was faster to reciprocate this time, tongue swirling against mine. After a few minutes of rough kissing, I pulled away, leaving us both breathless.

This wasn't my plan. Not by a long shot.

I wanted a conversation, but an uncontrollable and insatiable hunger had taken over. A hunger only she could satiate. I waited years, and now that I'd had her, I didn't know how to stop.

I kissed her frantically with one hand cupping her chin and the other on her waist. I greedily explored her mouth as her tongue readily stroked back.

Running a thumb down her bare arm, I felt her break out in goosebumps. I dipped my head to lick her jaw while my fingers slipped inside her shorts. I played with the edge of her panties without touching her bare, proceeding with caution to give her a chance to stop me.

I gently grazed over the material, waiting for an indication. When I did it again, Raven moaned. It's what I needed; this was everything.

Keeping my eyes trained on her, I moved to find her clit. She was dripping wet. I fingered her while my mouth kissed and licked her. I grabbed her top and moved it down to expose her tits. I squeezed her breast and flicked her nipple with my tongue. Raven shuddered when I sucked on her nipple harder by hollowing out my cheeks. Her mouth was slightly parted, pupils dilated. Her hands pressed against my shoulders for balance, legs quivering as if unable to remain standing for long.

I wanted nothing more than to watch her come apart. I needed it.

I suspended her in the air and walked us to the bed, all the while kissing her. After kicking my shoes off, I lowered her onto the mattress. Grabbing onto the waistband, I pulled down her shorts and underwear. Her tank top and bra were the next to go.

Fuck me.

I had never seen anything so perfect.

Starting from her neck, I kissed every part of her body. Licking, tasting, and sucking on her perfect skin until I reached her abdomen. Once I neared her pussy, I glanced up. Raven lifted her head to look down. She watched me press a kiss on her cunt. I stroked her slit with my fingers and swiped her opening with my tongue.

"Fuck, you taste so good. So... fucking... good," I stuttered in between licks.

"Oh, my God." Raven closed her eyes, head falling on the mattress.

I explored her greedily, lapping at her nub before stabbing my tongue inside. She writhed under me, legs jerking. Raven squirmed unbearably, but I ignored her pleas and kept at it until a cry ripped through her.

"Oh, fuck. I am coming. Oh, my God. Fuuuck!" Raven screamed with her hands in my hair.

As Raven came down from her peak, I kissed her inner thigh, breasts, neck, and pouty lips. This time, she kissed me back. Hard. I shifted us on the bed and maneuvered her head to rest on my chest.

Other than her heavy breathing, the room was quiet.

“Do you want to—” Raven started.

“No, you’ll still be sore. I’m fine.” That was the truth. I only wanted to hold her tonight. I shifted my erection. I might be hard as hell, but I was content enjoying the view.

The exhaustion from the orgasm and the jet lag took hold of Raven. Her eyelids grew heavy. Within minutes, she was fast asleep in my arms.

This was how it was meant to be between us. I smiled and kissed her hair. After months of mental torture and insomniac nights, I had finally found peace. I undressed down to my boxers, pulled her back to me, and slipped into the same dream world with her.



Raven

A loud thud woke me. Maybe an hour had passed, or maybe five. I had no concept of time or how long we had been napping, but I heard the distinct thud.

Milo was still holding me, fast asleep. “Milo.” I shook him.

“Hmm.”

“Milo, wake up.”

“Wassup?”

“I heard something.”

“It’s nothin’.” Milo sounded groggy.

“Milo! Wake. Up. I think someone broke in.”

“What!” That finally caught his attention, and he jumped out the bed to get dressed. “I’ll check downstairs. Stay here and lock the door after me, then

call 911. Do you have a bat or anything heavy lying around?”

I started dressing, too. “There is a glass bottle on my dresser. You can smash—”

“Hello! Anyone home?” Reid’s unmistakable voice carried through the open door.

This was my worst nightmare. Now I wished it were an intruder instead. “Shit,” I whispered. “You need to leave.”

Milo glared at me in response.

“Milo, you need to go to your room.”

“No,” he said curtly.

Did he want his little brother to find us like this? I didn’t know what to do. I could hear Reid shuffling. If he came in here... this scene looked bad because it was bad.

I straightened my clothes and ran toward the door. If Milo wouldn’t leave, I would. I had to find Reid before he came in here.

Acting as casual as possible, I descended the stairs. “Hello, Stud. I see someone found their way out of Paris.”

“Hello, Beautiful.”

I jumped into Reid’s open arms for a hug as he lifted me into the air.

“How was your flight?”

“So fucking long. I’m beat.”

I heard Milo’s footsteps behind me but couldn’t force myself to turn and face him. “Hey, scamp.” Milo hugged Reid, ignoring me.

“If I am a scamp, then you are an old man.”

“I like being an old man.” Milo pointed a thumb at himself. “You hungry? I made dinner, but Rave and I never got around to it.”

Was that an innocent comment or a backhanded dig? I no longer understood what was happening with Milo.

The three of us sat for dinner. Deciding to focus on Reid instead of Milo, I acted normal—laughing, joking, and teasing Reid. Inside, I was a mix of turmoil and chaos.

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CHAPTER 6

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SEPTEMBER 2015



Raven

IT WAS LABOR DAY. TRUE TO SINCLAIR FAMILY TRADITION, THERE WAS A full-blown all-day barbecue. We were all piled into the kitchen and patio area.

Milo usually insisted our parties were contained in the downstairs area. This rule was to remain in place until every member of the family turned sixteen, which meant until Mia turned sixteen. As if it was the magical age to become a responsible partygoer.

However, on Labor Day, Milo allowed guests to roam free in the house for this barbecue. A daytime barbecue didn't stand to threaten his impressionable younger sister with acts of debauchery.

Like every year, we'd invited neighbors, school friends, family friends, and Milo's college friends. He had more friends than Reid, Mia, and I combined.

Everybody loved him, and everyone looked up to him. I didn't know one person who disliked Milo. His easygoing vibe made his presence extremely attractive. My heart swelled with pride. Milo would also be highly

successful once his app launched next year. As if he needed more bait to charm people. As if anyone could ever resist him.

Including myself, apparently.

I still hadn't wrapped my mind around the loss of my innocence to Milo. Luckily, Reid came home the next night, providing a much-needed distraction.

That night, Reid and I stayed up all night playing video games. And we left for the Hamptons the following day. Janeen's family owned a house in the Hamptons and allowed her to invite a bunch of her school friends. I spent some much-needed time away from the city, allowing me to wrap my brain around my new reality—Milo deflowered me.

We returned home the same day Mia arrived from Grand Cayman.

I missed her so damn much. There was an emptiness in this house when she was gone. The moment she stepped inside, this inanimate brick-and-mortar came to life.

Since her return, Mia insisted on spending every waking and sleeping moment together. We spent the week visiting all our favorite New York City spots. Mia wanted to be re-acquainted with city life after being locked away on an island.

On her first night back, Mia insisted the four of us have a slumber party in my room. She had her brothers and me wrapped around her little finger, so we gave in. Mia and I bunked on the bed with the boys in sleeping bags on the floor. We cuddled, ate popcorn, and watched crappy movies. There was so much teasing, jesting, catching up, and love. It was a connection we lost over the summer—one that I missed so much.

The night was magical, reminding me of simpler times. Everything was normal, as if this thing with Milo had never happened. Like I had imagined it, or it was all a big misunderstanding.

Milo showed no signs of awkwardness or indication that anything had happened between us. He was utterly casual—until he grabbed me for a

breathhtaking kiss when Reid and Mia went downstairs to replenish the snacks.

He let go before they walked in, never uttering a word to me. He went back to being cool, calm, and collected.

I had whiplash. Did that happen? I was losing my grip on reality.

So, when Mia woke me up the following day and dragged me out of bed, I didn't mind. I needed an escape from my mind. Mia was the only one loud enough to speak over the pesky voice in my head. She was pure, honest, and wore her heart on her sleeve. It was infectious. I didn't make bullet points in my mind or over-analyze when we chatted.

This wasn't a dig at her intelligence or depth. Mia was extremely intelligent but also a muscle relaxer, relaxing my tense brain muscles. I needed her badly to feel sane again.

So, I didn't complain when she insisted on sticking by my side all week. I didn't complain when we spent hours getting mani-pedis and makeovers. I didn't complain when she wanted to have a slumber party every night to make up for the last four months. Face masks, girly movies, popcorn, staying up late, and gossip. Bring it on.

But my grip on reality loosened again when I caught Milo pushing the door open the first night Mia slept over.

I realized why he was there, but he didn't expect Mia to be.

Mia frowned at him and gave him a "Girls only, out please," sass comment.

Milo mumbled, "Why are the lights still on? It's bedtime," before heading back.

He came to my room every night, only to find Mia sleeping in my bed. He'd leave without making a peep, but I could feel the look on his face. Impatient and hanging by a thread.

And today, it was like he couldn't wait one more second. I had felt his eyes on me all day.

I should be flattered. Milo was the ultimate catch. Every girl my age would die to be with someone like him. Every girl his age would die to be with him or kill each other to be with him. Milo was the definition of the perfect man—men wanted to be him, and women wanted to be with him.

So, why did I find myself avoiding being alone with him?

I loved Milo when we were all together, watching movies and having family dinners.

I didn't know how to feel about the new Milo when he was alone with me.

Since my return from Paris, a dark cloud surrounded us whenever we were alone. A darkness that had no place or relevance with the rest of Milo's identity. It was causing his moods to be volatile, impatient, and sexually charged. He was like a ticking time bomb.

And it was scaring the shit out of me.

Chugging back my remaining red wine, I pushed these thoughts away and focused on the conversation instead.

"... especially the heat. That was the worst," Mia wrapped up her lecture on why the Grand Cayman was hell on earth. The small crowd around us seemed amused.

I wasn't listening. I didn't need to. Mia had been complaining about the Grand Cayman since her return. Suffice it to say, she didn't have a good summer. Her dissatisfaction had nothing to do with the island and everything to do with Uncle Reese hiring a nanny to take care of her while he worked. None of us were there to keep her company, either.

"Jeez, Mia. How terrible for you. You had to spend a summer in paradise," Reid teased.

Mia huffed. "If it's such a paradise, then why don't you go there next summer, and I'll go to Paris?"

Asher laughed at Mia's sass. "That's a great idea," he chimed in. "Maybe we can take a group trip to the Grand Cayman next summer and stay at the

Sinclair beach house for free.” He raised his beer bottle to clink with Reid’s.

Asher Huntzberger was here tonight. He was the first boy I kissed. We had remained good friends throughout the years.

“And we’ll ship Mia off to Paris. You can be free labor for Theresa.” Reid grinned ear to ear.

Not one to back down, Mia drove her point home. “That’s fine. I’ll get free Theresa Beckett Specials while you fuckers fry in the heat with sand in your ass.”

“Language!” Milo chided as he joined the conversation. “And no one is wearing Theresa Beckett Specials.”

“You said bad words when you were my age,” Mia complained. “And Raven wears Theresa Beckett Specials.”

“Hey, asshole.” I elbowed Mia. “Way to throw me under the bus.”

“Ladies, please. Language. Show some decorum.” Milo’s exasperated attempts to discipline us were met with a round of laughter.

This was the Milo I loved. How could you not? I worshipped this Milo.

“And why the fuck should we show decorum because we are ladies?” Alexa challenged. I liked this girl. A huge feminist at heart, she was never one to let something like this slide.

Milo put his hands up in surrender. “Everyone should show decorum, but since joining this conversation, only the ladies have dropped f-bombs and curse words.”

“Yeah, son! Cause we men got decorum,” Asher boomed.

“Decorum for men,” Reid egged him on, swinging an arm around me to pull me into a one-handed hug. “Not to mention, Alexa, Milo is allowing you out of the dungeon for this barbecue under the condition that you don’t corrupt our baby sister. If you don’t want to return to the basement, keep the language clean.”

Alexa was a close friend of Milo's, who also used to be his fuck buddy. Despite fucking him, I never saw her upstairs or in his room. When their intimate relationship ended, Milo moved on without peril, while Alexa was a wreck for a while. I guess he replaced her with me.

Except, everyone knew about Alexa, and no one had a clue about us. That thought made me feel dirty and cheap. Suddenly, I felt a sense of camaraderie with Alexa.

"Look who's talking?" I narrowed my eyes at Reid. "Your potty mouth should get you locked up and far away from us, impressionable ladies."

"Nope! 'Cause I got decorum." Reid straightened his posture, waving his hand like a Miss Universe contestant greeting the crowd.

Everyone laughed, and the day passed with nonsense conversations, old friends, lots of food, and lots of drinks. A few hours later, I headed to the living room to watch TV. I needed a break from socializing.

Suddenly, someone grabbed my elbow. I whipped my head in that direction. Milo.

There was an intensity in his eyes. He was vibrating with violent energy, and all I could do was stare like a deer in headlights. He flexed his fingers and pulled at my elbow. Milo rushed us up the stairs without a word, charging toward his room. I could barely keep up or catch my breath as he moved us to his room and locked the door.

We were alone in his room once more.



Milo

One week.

I had barely any contact with Raven for a whole week. This was the first time Mia wasn't attached to her hips. Did she think a houseful of people

would stop me from taking advantage of that?

Reid was finally over his dose of Raven when Mia came into the picture. My siblings were so fucking annoying. After spending a frustrating amount of time being joined at the hip with Raven, Mia insisted on sleeping in Raven's bed every night. I considered shipping Mia off to boarding school. For Christ's sake, she was worse than Reid.

What was with the Sinclairs and our fascination with Raven? I tried to get Raven's attention every night and at every opportunity. We still hadn't talked. I only knew I had become a madman and needed to be around Raven to feel sane.

All day, I had felt like a ticking time bomb ready to go off. When I finally found Raven alone, I came at her like a wild beast. Manhandled her in caveman style. We had sex and then nothing for days. No conversation. No contact. My insides were about to explode with my need for her.

"Milo, what—"

Before she could finish her sentence, I swooped her up and pushed her against the bedroom door, covering her lips with mine. Pressing my body as close as possible, I kissed her desperately, devouring her with my mouth. I couldn't stop if I wanted to, and I didn't particularly want to stop.

I forced myself to pull away every so often to let the girl breathe. When I'd see her take a sharp breath, I was back for more. It had been an eternity since I kissed her. There was a maddening desire to cover her with me, surround her, be all over her, suffocate her with my body. I grabbed onto her thighs to lift her. My groin pressed into her as my hands spread her ass cheeks wide. I kissed her and ground her against the door, ready to fall apart. Unbuttoning her pants, I inserted two fingers inside her.

"Are you sore? Does this hurt?" I panted, barely able to say the words.

"Wha—N-No."

I sighed in relief.

My muscles were tense from my lust high, which would remain dissatisfied until I was inside her. Moving her off the door, I carried Raven to my bed. I didn't give two flying fucks about who was here—I didn't know why I invited these people to my house or why we were having this stupid party. I wanted everyone out, including my siblings. Nothing mattered other than this.

Raven was more sensible than me. "Wait. There are people in the house."

"I don't care." Because I didn't.

As I worked the buttons of her shirt, Raven restated her feeble protests. "What if Reid or Mia come here looking for you?"

"Rave," I groaned desperately. "I fucking need you. I can't wait, not for another second. No one's stopping this. Not even you. Now take my fucking shirt off," I growled, ripping off her bra.

I had lost finesse and fumbled with her zipper. I slid her pants to her thighs, taking her panties while Raven had barely unbuttoned my shirt.

Impatient with her slow fingers, I unbuckled my jeans to expedite the process. I kept chanting a mantra to slow down. We only had sex once, so it would still be uncomfortable for her. I couldn't drive into her the way I wanted—with manic force.

I needed to calm down if I wanted her to enjoy sex. She wouldn't come during vaginal sex the first few times. I had to find other ways to make it pleasurable.

Pushing her gently down on the mattress, I kissed the pulse of her neck and sucked on the skin. With biting kisses, I moved to her perfect breasts, perky and full in my hands. I trailed my tongue along her chest, which rose and fell. Lapping my tongue, I closed my mouth over her nipple. The sensation was sometimes unbearable but sensitive enough to make her toes curl. I nibbled and licked until Raven vibrated under me like she couldn't take it anymore.

I stopped torturing her and moved my mouth to her cunt with a grazing bite.

“Ah!” Raven’s body jerked on impact.

I gave her a painfully slow lick. Raven reflexively arched her back, pushing her opening into my mouth to give me more access. She stared at me. There was a primal look on her face that wasn’t there a minute ago. Thoughts of the guests downstairs were gone. She was with me, waiting for my next move. To appease her, I flicked her nub and then sucked on it.

“Milo,” Raven gasped and fisted my hair with her delicate hands. Her thighs were jerking, her pussy throbbing against my tongue.

God, I needed this contact. We both did from the sound of it.

I flattened my tongue and licked, leaving no room for air or space between my mouth and her cunt. Listening to her moans, I located a spot that made Raven’s back arch. I licked harder. Punishingly hard, giving her no choice but to come for me. Her body trembled as she thrust forward.

“Oh, God,” Raven whimpered.

“I missed this,” I breathed, apparently allowing too much space between my tongue and her pussy. Raven yanked at my hair to push my face down as if she’d lose her climax otherwise. Like she couldn’t wait any longer.

I loved it. She was needy for me. Needy for only what I could give her. She was dripping, riding my tongue, and entirely insatiable. I didn’t deny her. Increasing my tempo, I drove it home as Raven ground against my mouth.

“Oh, fuck. I am coming,” Raven moaned.

I blasted up, pushing myself forward with my knees until my throbbing cock found her cunt.

“Oh, God—” Raven’s voice wavered.

She was still coming when I rubbed the head of my dick against her sex. As she steadied her breaths, I pushed inside. Her natural lubrication allowed easier access this time, but she was still too tight. I grabbed her hair for control so I wouldn’t slam inside. Inch by inch, I expanded and stretched her until I was all the way inside.

“Fuck.”

I was inside her.

Inside Raven.

My Raven.

“Oh, shit!” I lifted my body slightly to stare at where we were joined. The sight alone could make me come.

Raven hadn’t made the heart-wrenching sounds from our first time. While the moment was bliss, Raven’s pain was killing me. This time, she took a sharp inhale. I stalled on top, letting her get adjusted.

“Does it still hurt?”

“It’s not so bad.” Raven took more steadying breaths.

I distracted her from the uncomfortable, foreign feeling by dropping kisses over her face and neck. Moving one hand down between us, I stroked her sensitive clit.

Raven gasped, not expecting the new sensation. The pleasure distracted her from the pain. With one hand on her jaw, I kissed her, eating at her mouth and fucking it with my tongue. I pressed my dick against her sensitive spot, which seemed to build Raven.

Her little whimpers and cries filled my room. She was so fucking erotic—lips parted, eyes heavy and glazed over.

“I missed this. I missed this so fucking much.”

I only ground against her with my dick instead of thrusting. Thrusting would be painful as her walls would burn from the movement. It might not be the sex motion of in and out, but Raven enjoyed this part. I desperately wanted this reaction one day while I fucked her hard. Baby steps.

I let my forehead drop to hers, staring into her eyes and not breaking the connection as she chased her high. She wrapped her arms around my back,

trying to get me closer to her clit. That soaking wet tightness built again. A silent scream from her parted lips leaked out, gaining volume.

“Shit. I’m coming again.” Her head fell back. “Oh, God.”

I moved upon hearing Raven go off. Rotating my hips, I pulled out only to push inside torturously slow. My pace increased when I realized Raven was too distracted by her orgasm to notice the burning sensations. Soon, I was close to finding my release.

“Fuck, baby.” My wild groan was guttural. My world turned black, my heart hammering as if it might explode. With one final thrust, I spilled inside her.

I was a panting mess as we both lay there with my face in her hair. I turned to kiss her cheek, neck, or anything in a reachable vicinity without moving.

Realizing I must be crushing her, I shifted to the side, still holding her close. Pretty soon, we drifted off, with me subconsciously waking up to ensure this was real.

Eventually, my eyes opened due to Raven’s fussiness.

“Should we go back to the party?”

“Why?” I whispered, stroking her hair.

“All of our friends are here. If we’re both gone for so long—”

I sighed. She was right, as I had been reckless.

“Okay.” Brushing my lips against hers, I started dressing though Raven appeared drained. “I can go downstairs first. Take your time.”

“Okay.”

“Oh, and tell Mia to sleep in her damn room tonight. After everyone falls asleep, come back to my room.”

Raven tensed. Tucking her hair behind her ear, she stammered, “Oh. I-I uh. I d-don't—”

I patiently awaited her response, staring intently. I was hoping for the intensity to portray that I wasn't playing around with this request. Hell, it was a demand at this point.

Raven stopped stammering and took a deep breath to gain enough confidence to speak in complete sentences. "I can't stay here tonight," she began determinedly. "I have school tomorrow."

"Why can't you sleep here if you have school?"

"I have to pack my bag and iron my uniform. If I stay here, I'll stay up late." She didn't meet my gaze while making the assertion. She might have a point, but it didn't ease my annoyance.

"Raven, you can still do those things. I'm asking you to sleep down the hall, not on the fucking moon. What's the difference if you sleep in your room versus mine?" I failed to keep the irritation out of my tone.

"Please don't be mad. I assumed you'd go back to campus tonight. With your classes starting tomorrow—" Raven glanced at me apprehensively, seemingly frightened.

I had to stop being so angry at her.

This wasn't about sleeping in my room. I didn't know where we stood and was too nervous about bringing it up or pushing Raven. I didn't want her to bolt and find another douchebag as she did over the summer.

I sounded like a broken record. I told her that I had forgiven her. Obviously, I hadn't. I was still pissed. I didn't trust her anymore. She wasn't making it easy, either. It didn't reduce my anxiety when she acted reluctant. Lately, I had to fight for an inch from her.

However, I had to stop if I didn't want to scare her away.

"I won't try anything if you need to wake up early," I muttered, unsure if I believed it myself. "And I'm not staying on campus this year," I added.

"Why not?" Raven frowned, perplexed.

"With everything in the house, it's easier than going back and forth."

Raven nodded in understanding. Then she frowned again. “Isn’t it already paid for?”

“There’s a long waiting list of people trying to get into on-campus housing. It wasn’t difficult to get out of it.”

It wasn’t as easy as I made it sound. Changing my accommodations was a considerable inconvenience, especially two days before the semester started. I couldn’t verbalize the real reason I went through the trouble. I could barely admit it to myself. The reason why I was staying at home was—drumroll—I didn’t trust Raven anymore.

She refused to talk about us, and I couldn’t push until she was ready. This much I had come to realize. She had been using Reid and Mia as buffers to avoid a conversation. There was no way to grasp what was inside her head, and until I knew where we stood, I wanted to ensure other douchebags weren’t in her proximity. As unhealthy as it was, I was staying to keep an eye on Raven.

There was one other factor. After being with Raven, only a few days away was brutal. At my first chance, I dragged her to my room despite the house full of people. I could finally breathe after having her under me. I’d take torture over having to stay away for days on end.

Bending to meet her gaze, I returned to the original issue. “So, I’ll see you tonight?”

“Okay,” Raven conceded.

“Good.” With a final kiss on her lips, I headed downstairs.



Raven

True to my word, I slept in Milo’s room the night of the barbecue. True to his word, Milo did nothing physical except cover my face with lots of sweet

kisses, stroke my hair, and hold me tight while we slept. He also wasn't angry like he had been recently. I felt cherished, not scared.

The next day, Milo asked me to come back to his room. The familiar heat reflected in his eyes. We got physical—earth-shattering type of physical. My trepidation returned during our interactions as his body vibrated with fury. All the same, I came three times. Twice from him going down on me and once more during sex while he rubbed my clit to orgasm. The discomfort from the invasion was getting better.

After staying up late last night for mind-blowing orgasms, I was sore and swollen. I was exhausted but had a study group session at five p.m. and a dance class at seven. Private schools had a full load that didn't accommodate your newly found sex life. I finished my schoolwork in the library while waiting for my group to show up. I was yawning and dreaming of my bed by the time they did.

After the study session, I called Dad while walking to the dance studio. His virtual assistant picked up and told me he couldn't come to the phone. As if to plunge the knife into my heart, she informed me of giving him my messages. He purposefully hadn't returned the calls.

Thanks. I didn't need or ask for the extra piece of information.

Swiping the tears falling onto my cheeks, I stared at my phone. Those promises over the summer about things being different were all lies. He kept in touch with me because I was with Mom. I knew it in my heart but didn't want to believe it. He wanted to show Mom that he was a good father. Or perhaps he tried to one-up her upon finding out I was staying with her for the summer. Maybe he wanted to find an excuse to talk to her, knowing she was nearby.

Either way, I had his attention while I was with her. Upon returning to New York, I had reverted to used trash as far as Dad was concerned. Mom was no better. Since her career took off, she barely contacted me.

The day came crashing down. I was physically drained, and now the mental exhaustion had taken hold. I didn't bother with my dance class and rushed

home instead, wanting to bury myself under a warm comforter.

With a sullen mood and sleepy state of mind, I stumbled up the stairs. I unbuttoned my shirt but left the white tank top underneath, not bothering to take off my skirt as I sank into the bed.

It must have been eight or nine p.m. when I heard my bedroom door creak. Raising my head, I found Milo letting himself in and locking the door behind him.

I gawked at him in my sleepy haze. He was painfully beautiful with an angelic face. That body, perfectly ripped, and the veiny forearms with broad shoulders. His defined biceps peeked through his fitted shirt.

How come I never noticed Milo this way before?

I had slept with him, so how did I miss this? He was a walking sex god. Jesus. How do women resist him? They should be throwing themselves at his feet. He might scare me at times, but it was impossible to deny that Milo was the epitome of male hotness.

I couldn't help giving him a sleepy smile. In turn, Milo rewarded me with his million-dollar megawatt grin. Crouching next to me, he kissed my forehead before brushing his lips to mine.

"Hi." My eyes fluttered close when the bed dipped. Milo climbed on, spooning me from behind.

"Hey yourself," he murmured, kissing my hair. "Did you have a good day?"

"Mm," I mumbled, half asleep.

"How come you're in bed already?"

"Bed's comfy."

"Oh," was all Milo said.

I didn't say more, falling back into my slumber.

“I got a call from your dance teacher. She said you were a no-show today. They couldn’t get in touch with you, so they called me.”

Milo drew imaginary lines on my arms. Goosebumps. I was getting wet from arm touching. What the hell? It wasn’t foreplay, but I was drowning in his heady lust fog from the slight touch. I couldn’t think or focus.

“Was tired,” I mumbled.

“You never missed class before. She was worried. Why didn’t you call them to let them know?”

I didn’t respond. All I could think about was getting off or going back to sleep. I chose to sleep.

“Rave?” Milo scratched my back to get my attention.

“Hmm.”

Milo gave up on the one-sided conversation. “If you’re going back to sleep, get out of your school uniform.”

I had drifted to sleep when hands grabbed the waistband of my skirt and slipped it down my legs. “Wha—”

“You went to sleep in your skirt. It’s getting wrinkled.”

I forced my eyes open and watched Milo drape my skirt over a hanger. He turned off the lights except for the bedside lamp and undressed down to his boxers. He returned to the bed, washboard abs glistening in the dim light.

I couldn’t look away.

Lifting the comforter, Milo slipped under it while I stared, wondering if an angel had fallen on earth. Or maybe it was the Devil. A beautiful Devil.

“You are so fucking hot.” The words slipped out before I could stop myself.

Milo seemed surprised, like it was the last thing he had expected to hear. He raised an amused eyebrow. “You’re not so bad yourself.” He grinned ear to ear. “In fact, you might be the prettiest girl I have—”

My hand moved to grab the back of his neck to drag him closer. I nudged my tongue out, seeking entrance into his mouth.

Milo stiffened in shock. I had never made a move before.

He reciprocated without hesitation, hands pulling my hair while moaning into my mouth. Our tongues wrestled for control as he hauled me closer. By the time his undeniable erection strained between us, I was awake. Fully awake.

It didn't matter if my negligent parents didn't bother returning my calls. Or if my father spent time with me only to spite my mother. Or if my mother would rather chase fame than be with me.

This man cared. He cared enough to find out why I didn't attend a dance class. My parents didn't even know about my dance classes. Since my return, they hadn't checked to see if I was dead or alive. Milo was the only one who could replace what they took from me. Replace the things I could never verbalize or demand out of them. They broke my heart. He put it back together.

Currently, I couldn't get myself to think past it. I couldn't bring myself to care about Milo's newfound anger, either. I wanted temporary oblivion, and Milo was the only one who could give it to me. He had been overwhelmed. He knew I was sad, too. Maybe this was his way of consoling us—by letting me get lost in this gorgeous and brilliant sex god of a man while temporarily blanking his mind of obligations. Whatever his reasons for pursuing this, I'd take the momentary reprieve.

Feeling brazen, I slipped my hand inside his boxers and stroked his dick. Without hesitation, I lowered to take him in my mouth.

"Fuck," Milo thundered. He pulled the loose hair out of my face and gripped it with one hand. His other sifted through my hair. He didn't guide me this time. I followed my intuition from the sounds he made.

Milo groaned out loud. Feeling him tremble under me made me feel powerful. I was also the only one who could give him what he needed.

I lifted my eyes to look at him. He stared at me with an incredulous expression. We maintained eye contact as his dick throbbed in my mouth.

“Fuck. I’m going to come. Take your mouth off me, baby.”

I was aware of what happened next. When Reid and I watched porn, we saw women swallow cum with some of it dripping out of their mouths. I had gone down on Michel but never swallowed. In my current sexual state, the challenge didn’t bother me.

Milo stared at me in shock as I kept sucking him off harder.

“Baby, what are—oh, fuck.” Milo punched down the mattress with one hand while tightening the grip on my hair with the other.

It was like taking a shot. I didn’t overthink it, and it went down smoothly. Thank God nothing dribbled out of my mouth. It wasn’t a sexy look.

“Shit.” Milo seemed astonished by my boldness. “Come here.”

He grabbed my face and kissed me feverishly. Within seconds, my underwear was off as Milo pushed me onto the mattress. He swooshed down, two strong hands lifting my thighs. Before I could reposition adequately, his wet tongue was in my folds.

Milo had figured out how to make me come. He paid close attention to my reactions the first couple of times, and now he had the lyrics to my pussy memorized.

My blood heated, and my ears rang. I trembled when he lapped his tongue around my nub. Pressing his tongue against me, he ground onto my clit, leaving no room for air. I arched my back within minutes, ready to shatter for him.

“Fuck. Oh, my God. Oh, my God!” I came holding onto his hair and riding his tongue, not ready to let the high end.

I heard words, but in my satiated mind, I couldn’t figure out the source.

“Raven?” My face was moved with a grip on my chin, Milo’s emerald eyes almost blinding me with their shine. He chuckled. “I love seeing you post-

orgasm. You are so cute. Completely out of it and sprawled out.”

He pressed a kiss on my lips, rubbing his dick against my sex. He was hard again. Extremely hard.

He told me last night how incredible he felt when we were joined. Like we were connected as one. That’s what I need today. I needed to feel connected to someone who cared about me, like I was a part of them.

I grabbed his shoulders when Milo pushed inside me, hugging him tightly to increase the intimacy. Milo held on to my hips and plunged deep, smacking his hips against mine until finding his climax.

Afterward, we lay side by side.

“Rave.” Milo brushed his thumb over my lips. “Isn’t it time we talked about it?”

Talk about what?

Oh.

I had never missed a dance class before. I should’ve known better than to assume Milo would drop the topic. Those classes were costly. I shouldn’t have bailed, but I also didn’t want to discuss why I skipped—my parents.

It was weird for Milo to act like a concerned parent while holding me naked. The lines were severely blurred between us. So, I kept my eyes shut to suspend this alternate reality.

“Rave,” Milo tried again before giving out a defeated sigh. He kissed my cheek and pulled me close as we called it a night.



After dinner, Reid and I cleaned the table while Milo boxed the leftovers.

It was a Friday night family dinner. We had a massive feast with way too many leftovers. Mia did her chores in record time and bolted to her room, talking to her friends or whatever the hell thirteen-year-olds did.

“When do you want to leave for Janeen's party?” Reid quirked an eyebrow at me.

“Janeen’s Party? Are her parents home?” Milo responded on my behalf, knowing the answer full well.

Slight annoyance nagged at me. Reid narrowed his eyes, too, but didn’t respond.

“It’s for Janeen’s birthday,” I offered, hoping Milo didn’t make a thing out of it. I didn’t want to mitigate another fight if this tainted Reid’s good mood. “She throws a September blowout every year.”

Milo didn’t comment, seemingly biting his tongue.

“It’s true. We go every year.” Reid tapped his phone, presumably texting our clique of friends. “I’m going to take a shower and change. Let’s leave right after.”

As soon as Reid was out of earshot, Milo turned to me. “How late will you be?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged.

“Right.” He appeared tense as if wanting to argue.

“You okay?”

“I didn’t know you guys went to this party yearly,” Milo responded skeptically. “Will there be drugs, drinking, parental supervision? I don’t have any details.”

My blank stare likely reflected confusion over Milo’s apprehension. Reid and I went to plenty of parties. Milo was aware of our drinking. There was a full-on war about it.

Reid and Milo got into it a bunch of times because Reid started drinking at fourteen. Milo put a stop to it. Reid called him a hypocrite since Milo also started drinking at a young age. Milo explained that he didn’t have good caretakers to look out for his well-being. Reid did.

Milo felt strongly about it, so I never gave him grief. I declined Reid's offer numerous to join him for a drink, scared of Milo finding out.

Reid disagreed with Milo's do as I ask, not as I do parenting method. In fear of Reid's further rebellion, Milo made a deal. Reid and I would be allowed to go to parties, including Milo's infamous parties, if we abstained from drinking until college. However, he'd lock us up indefinitely if he caught us drinking.

Reid renegotiated that deal. He agreed to stop drinking temporarily with the understanding that when we turned sixteen, we'd be allowed to drink at parties and social events, so long as we were safe.

At the time, Milo thought sixteen was far away. He gave in, hoping our dads would return from their assignments before we were old enough to cash in on the deal. They could deal with the fallout. Until then, his job was to keep us alive.

Milo looked ready to split his hair as we neared our sixteenth birthday, and our dads' were nowhere in sight. Nonetheless, Milo kept his word. When we turned sixteen, he looked the other way while we drank. He did give us a bunch of safety lectures before we turned sixteen. To this day, Milo occasionally provides refresher courses on what not to do.

Don't get blackout drunk.

Don't mix alcohol and drugs.

Don't drink and stumble around the city. If you are in a safe place, stay there.

I received additional lectures for being a girl.

Watch out for roofies.

Don't accept a drink you didn't make.

Don't get so drunk that you aren't in control.

We mostly followed his rules. Reid and I broke them on special occasions, like our birthdays. We had gone to plenty of parties and had always been

safe. If we followed his rules, Milo never gave us a hard time.

So, why was this suddenly a problem?

“Does it matter?” Tonight’s line of questioning was throwing me off. “We go to parties all the time. We are careful. Reid hasn’t gotten out of line since we were fourteen. I always keep him in check. Even if you don’t trust Reid, I’ve never given you a reason to doubt me.”

Milo tensed instead of acknowledging my words or agreeing with me.

What the fuck. What was that supposed to mean?

“You do trust me, don’t you?” I tried again for good measure.

Milo remained quiet, eyeing me apprehensively. I said nothing more and returned to cleaning up, feeling his eyes burning through me.

“Just come to my room when you get home. I’ll leave the door open.” Milo didn’t bother looking at me as he dismissively walked away.

Come to my room.

Those were the exact four words he uttered every night.

I used to love going to Milo’s room and talking to him for hours. Now, it seemed like a dirty request. It shouldn’t be. We had slept in his room without having sex. I had my period earlier in the week. It lasted four days. I wanted to abstain from sex while on my period. Milo still instructed me to come to his room. We watched movies and YouTube videos. He held me and kissed me. It was wonderful.

However, that hunger of his returned on day three. He said he could no longer hold out. We had sex in the shower and then on his bed after putting down a towel.

Milo’s insatiable appetite intimidated me. It frightened me when he acted as if he couldn’t stop. The only times we didn’t have sex were when I was too sore to continue. Otherwise, we’d probably have sex all the time.

I didn't have prior friends-with-benefits experience—let alone a real relationship—for comparison. I was friends with only one of Milo's ex-fuck buddies, Alexa. If the situation weren't so awkward, I'd ask her how often they had sex during their arrangement because this didn't seem normal.

Fuck. Why was I using the word normal? I was screwing my guardian while my parents lived it up abroad. I should throw the word normal out of my vocabulary.

Feeling heavy-hearted, I slowly walked to my room to get changed for the party.



Last night, Reid and I stayed over at Janeen's house. Reid was drinking. Nothing too excessive. All the same, he passed out in the guest bedroom. Pretty sure he also took one of his groupies in there.

I had no interest in interrupting their lovemaking or slugging home his dead-weight body. I thought it was best to stay the night. I did the responsible thing by texting Milo.

Rave: We are staying over at Janeen's.

Milo: You assured me that I could trust you.

What the hell? Milo told us to stay over if we were safe and had a few drinks.

Rave: You can. Reid passed out in the guest room. I didn't want to leave him there.

Milo: And which room are you sleeping in?

Seriously?

Rave: Janeen's room.

No response after the last text.

This morning, we didn't wake up until eleven a.m. After gathering our wits, Reid, Janeen, and I walked to a nearby cafe. As we squeezed into a booth, my phone alerted me of a message from Milo.

Milo: Meet me tonight at Sorento's at 7:30 p.m.

I frowned, unsure what to make of the text. It wasn't a question, but I responded with—

Rave: Okay.

Sorento was a local restaurant we frequented. It was my favorite, and I often went with Reid and Mia after school. I loved the food, the eclectic decor, and the overall vibe. I had no idea why Milo wanted to meet at Sorento. It wasn't like we could have sex at a restaurant.

It didn't matter. Milo didn't leave room for discussions anymore. It was never a request, always an order, like going to his room every night. It had turned into an expectation.

It was our dynamic for years—Milo deciding everything for me—but he was never this invested before. It never affected me to this extent.

Something flipped in Milo since we started a physical relationship. Sometimes he was caring and sweet, like the old Milo. At other times, I walked on eggshells, scared to set off his new volatile anger. I found myself doing whatever he wanted to avoid a fight or deflect his anger. Like his personality, my attitude toward him was fleeting. There were times when I was ecstatic to see Milo. Then there were times when I avoided him out of subconscious fear.

I wished he'd pick one personality and stick to it. This flip-flopping was driving me crazy.



Milo

I was nervous as shit. Really fucking nervous.

Technically, this was our first date. It happened to be with one of my best friends, and we'd already had sex. As a bonus, we lived together.

This was backward.

Fuck. I had no idea how to be romantic. I had never been someone's boyfriend or seriously dated anyone. Raven might be inexperienced in bed, but I was inexperienced in this arena.

I was twenty years old and never had a girlfriend. Kind of fucking pathetic, considering how early I started with my sexual conquests.

I wasn't a commitment-phobe. There was never enough time with my responsibilities and grueling academics. I also never met anyone who intrigued me enough to bestow the title.

I had gone on dates before, but the first or second date was when I told someone I didn't want to be in a committed relationship. We could date casually or be friends with benefits as long as there were no expectations.

When I went off to college, I finally had the time—or at least enough free time—for a girlfriend. This was thanks to Raven, who picked up the slack. Once I did have time, I'd lost interest in other women. I pined after the only girl I couldn't have.

Since we started sleeping together, it had been highs and lows. At times, I felt connected to Raven. She was the girl who was madly in love with me. On other days, she was closed off.

Last week, I went to her room after finding out she had missed her dance class. Out of nowhere, Raven came on to me and initiated sex. She looked at me like I was all she needed. Afterward, I tried talking about us, and she shut down.

I hadn't tried the conversation again. I realized it was a pointless discussion anyways. Nothing could change between us until my guardianship was over. After Raven graduated, we'd still face backlash from our families and

friends. However, if my legal obligations were done, we'd at least have a leg to stand on.

In the interim, I shouldn't be sleeping with the underaged girl I was supposed to be caring for. I should feel like a piece of shit and put an end to this relationship, but the truth was—I was all in. I'd known it since the day we kissed, perhaps even before.

While I didn't care anymore, it'd be hell for Raven and my siblings if the word got out. They wouldn't be able to deal with the taunting and the gossip.

If we discussed our relationship, the only possible conclusion would be to continue as-is for the next eight months. It was Raven's senior year. She might not want to experience her last year of high school dealing with the hurdles of a taboo relationship. She might want to take a date to her senior prom instead of dating the prom chaperone.

I couldn't deal with that, nor could I change the circumstance. There was no point dwelling on a sore topic. Raven didn't like heavy or awkward conversations, either. So, I simplified it. I was content being with her in any way I could. I wanted to be with only her, and she wanted me, too. We could have an understanding, even if we couldn't acknowledge it at present. After all, actions spoke louder than words. In that spirit, we could start by doing things outside the bedroom. Activities that didn't raise suspicion.

Asher threw a party last night in celebration of our new app. It would have been suspicious if I had taken Raven without Reid tagging along. I'd planned to discuss it with her when Janeen's party trumped me.

I couldn't say no. I had set clear expectations for Raven and Reid and allowed them reasonable freedom so long as they met them. I understood early that telling a teenager no only ended with teen rebellion.

I was irritated as fuck over the situation. I didn't commit to plans because of Raven. I stayed home, hoping she'd come home early. I was pissed when she decided to stay over at Janeen's. My jealousy came rushing back.

Fuck. All I felt lately was jealousy, possessiveness, and being out of my mind. Last night, I couldn't stop wondering who she was with and if horny teenagers were making moves on her.

The reasonable side of me was happy she was safe. The caveman side wanted to take a cab and drag her ass home. Except I couldn't do that without raising said suspicion.

I hadn't seen Raven since last night. I spent the day meeting my group about marketing strategies for our app. We launched it for beta testing and were assessing the reception. I sent Raven a text in between my meetings. Instead of being irrationally angry at her about a party, I needed to be proactive. Before she could make other plans, I asked her to meet me for a date. I made the arrangements—the nanny was staying over to watch Mia, and I made reservations at Raven's favorite restaurant. After dinner, we were going to her favorite Fro-Yo place, though Raven would likely insist on getting dessert at Sorento's.

It was two minutes past 7:30 pm, and I was already impatient. Why was I nervous? I lived with this chick.

Finally, I saw Raven walking through the restaurant door. Whenever I saw that girl, the wind was knocked out of me. I always noticed her hair first. With her pale complexion, her hair looked like the darkest shade of black. My eyes landed on her generous lips next. They looked plump, kissable, and bitable.

I was getting distracted again and needed to remain focused on the game plan.

I put up a hand to wave, and our eyes locked. Electricity coursed through me the moment we made eye contact, and everything else disappeared. Like a social media filter, the background faded away, leaving us in focus.

Raven smiled shyly and sauntered over. She was in a casual Theresa Beckett Special. The dress came to her thighs. Her four-inch heels elongated her toned legs, making the dress seem shorter.

I loved the skin she was showing, but so did every asshole eyeing her like she was on the menu. I wanted to stamp mine on her forehead so none of them would dare look again.

I stood when she reached the booth.

“Hi.” Raven leaned over to peck me on the cheek.

“How are you?”

“Good.”

“Here.” I handed her a menu and led her inside the booth, sliding in next to her.

“Mm. I am starving. What are you in the mood for?” Raven studied the menu.

“I like the Southwestern Salads here. What about you?”

“They have the best Red Velvet Cake.”

This girl was ridiculous. “Are you going to even look at the dinner menu or just order one of each dessert?”

Raven narrowed her eyes and mumbled, “I’ll get an appetizer.”

“At this rate, you’re going to be fat by twenty-five and have your first heart attack by thirty. Death at thirty-five.”

“Meh. Gotta go some someday. It’ll be worth it.”

We both burst out laughing.

I. Fucking. Missed. Us.

Laughing, teasing, normal, and in sync.

“How about we make a deal?” Putting an arm around her and pulling her close, I said, “I’ll live in denial that you’re digging yourself to an early grave if you eat something healthy and green first. Afterward, you can have

all four desserts on the menu. I'll look the other way and pretend you'll be alive to see Mia graduate college."

This won me a belly-aching laugh with her hair falling forward.

"Deal!" Raven handed the menu back to me. "Here. Choose something for me, and then I want all the desserts."

"Yes, Ma'am." Shaking my head, I put our menus down. This was normal. If Raven was unsure about a decision or didn't care enough to make one, she asked me to make it for her.

I ordered two salads and all four desserts when the waiter came for our order. He looked at me quizzically. He was about to tell me he'd ask about dessert after dinner, but I held up my hand to stop him.

"I have to order dinner and dessert together; otherwise, the lady won't be happy." I motioned toward Raven, who flashed her pearly whites to the waiter.

Raven insisted that dessert be ordered at the same time as dinner. If we didn't, she'd refer to The Incident of 2012. None of us wanted a repeat.

A couple of years ago, we went to a fusion restaurant. Raven was excited to try their extensive dessert menu, but the service was extremely slow. By the time we finished dinner, no one, other than Raven, was in the mood to wait another forty-five minutes for dessert.

Raven pouted all the way home and kept throwing daggers at us with her eyes. Very little could bring that girl down, but the lack of sugar would do it. She barely spoke for two days, freezing us out. It drove us crazy.

I shook my head as the waiter grabbed the menus and refilled our water. "How was the party last night?"

Raven visibly tensed at my inquiry. "It was fine," she mumbled vaguely.

I could feel her pulling away. This was ridiculous. I didn't bring her here to interrogate her. I wanted us to have a good time and changed the direction.

"Cool. How are your sketches going? Draw anything exciting lately?"

“Yes! I started a rough draft today.” Raven’s eyes lit up. She delved into a series of ideas for a new outfit. She spoke animatedly about a reversible dress so people could have two outfits for the price of one.

As dinner was served, she inquired about Columbia and the new app. Some people had a way with words, while others had listening skills. Raven had both. She listened attentively as I spoke of our app, interjecting at the right moments to ask insightful questions.

Once we dug into dessert, her face suddenly turned ghostly pale. Raven jerked out of the arm I had around her.

“Rave, are you okay?”

Not understanding the turn of events, I followed her gaze. She was staring at a family—mom, dad, and two teenage daughters. Twins.

“I go to school with them.”

Before I could respond, they spotted Raven and started walking over.

“Hey, Rave!” one of the twins said in a singsong voice.

“Umm. Hey guys. Wow, what a coincidence.”

“Raven. Hello there!” exclaimed a middle-aged lady I presumed was the twins’ mother. I recognized her from a PTA meeting.

“Hi, Mrs. Alpert.” Raven stood to air-kiss her cheek. “This is Mrs. Alpert.” Raven motioned at the woman to introduce us. “And this is my— this is Milo. He i-is—” Raven stammered for an appropriate title. “He is Reid’s brother.”

That’s what I had been reduced to? Reid’s brother?

I stood to shake hands. The dad gave me a once-over. “Yes, I remember meeting you.”

“That’s right. I saw you at one of the PTA meetings, and I think we chaperoned a school dance together.” I couldn’t place them, to be honest, but Wellington had a strict rule about parents and guardians being involved.

Parents must chaperone twice a year and attend four PTA meetings. It was a safe bet I had met them at one of those events.

“Maybe.” Mr. Alpert scrunched his face in concentration. “But I also know your family as well as the Becketts. John and I did our residencies together.”

“You did? You know Uncle John and my dad?”

“Yes. When John moved here, he knew my girls attended Wellington. Before Raven started school, he called so the girls could look out for her. That’s how they became friends.” He looked from his daughters to Raven for confirmation. They nodded in agreement.

“Mr. Alpert and Uncle Reese worked together when they first moved to New York. Small world,” Raven chimed in.

“That’s right.” Mr. Alpert smiled kindly. “You know, before leaving for Doctors Without Borders, John told me he only accepted the position because you agreed to take care of Raven. Later, he told me how you became Raven’s legal guardian. That’s such a wonderful thing you did, young man. Especially while you’re in school yourself. Raising teenagers and attending Columbia is no easy task. I couldn’t have done it.”

Raven turned beet red at the reminder. I could barely mutter a thank you. We had been reminded of our cruel reality, and I could already see the wheels turning in Raven’s head.

That’s how the world saw us—me raising her as if she were my kid. If I threw my arm around her now or kissed her, all those praises would turn into disdain. Disdain over taking advantage of the daughter Uncle John trusted me with.

Luckily, the hostess came over to show the Alpersts to their table. Raven kept glancing at them after they were seated, barely saying another word. This night was shot to hell.

“Should I get the check?” I asked.

I could feel my self-loathing return. Even as it did, it changed nothing for me. I eyed Raven apprehensively, needing the same confirmation from her.

“Yeah,” was all Raven managed in her small voice.

After grabbing the check, we strolled home quietly. I nixed the plan for Fro-Yo. She wasn’t in the mood. I could feel the over analyzation resonating from her and refused to give her space or pull away.

Opening the door to the house, I let Raven in first. Before she could bolt, I grabbed her elbow and whispered, “I’m going to check on Mia. Come to my room after you change.”

Raven froze. I was terrified of her saying no. I wouldn’t be able to deal with it if she shut down right. I needed her and couldn’t breathe without her.

My fingers dug into her elbow to communicate the seriousness of the request. My stern glare was meant to add intimidation. I didn’t care if my intensity freaked her out or if she had no choice in this matter, because right now, she didn’t.

Raven winced slightly before finally giving me a nod. Without looking in my direction, she raced to her room.

Lesson learned. If she were going to shut down every time we faced our reality, then I’d limit the reality. If she was only compliant inside the home perimeter, here’s where we’d stay.

I’d let her live in denial if she was ashamed of this relationship. If that’s what it took to keep her, we didn’t have to talk about us. We didn’t have to talk about anything anymore until things could change down the road.

This was torture for me, but I could take anything as long as I could touch her, feel her, smell her, hold her, and be inside her.

I needed her like I needed air, and that’s something I couldn’t risk losing.



Raven

I ran to my room and shut the door. My life was a mess, and I needed to talk to someone. Preferably an adult instead of an immature teenager.

I opened my laptop to launch Skype in hopes of speaking to my parents. The absentee parents were my last resort because I was sleeping with the only “present” parent I had left.

Sex might provide us with temporary oblivion, but the self-loathing to come after doesn’t. The physical aspect was fantastic with Milo. Everything else felt wrong. What seemingly started with helping Milo alleviate his anxiety and comfort me about my missing parents had morphed into something ugly, one I didn’t know how to back out of.

Milo dictated my life without leaving room to choose otherwise. I compartmentalized as much as I could, but the divider walls were crumbling—the ones separating my thoughts into different boxes.

We went to Sorento’s last weekend. We couldn’t grab a measly dinner without a rude awakening of our reality. We ran into my school friends, along with their parents. Of course, they knew of our situation and praised Milo for raising me. Mr. Alpert’s words were mortifying.

“Raising teenagers and attending Columbia is no easy task.”

I couldn’t hide from the shame. Milo was fucking me while raising me. I couldn’t comprehend how he acted so normal about this. When we were in public, it was like we were nothing. He barely acknowledged me anymore. The moment everyone was out of earshot, it was the same every night.

Come to my room.

I. Hated. Those. Words.

Recently, those were the only words he uttered to me. It made me feel like his cheap whore. Other than those words, we never conversed, and I missed the old Milo so damn much.

I missed my friend.

Whenever we were alone, Milo grabbed me and fucked me until late at night. He was always on a mission to make me come. By the time the exhaustion from the orgasms took hold, I'd be fast asleep. It was the same every night.

Yesterday, after hours of sex, he finally said something different. Something that annoyed me more than him not talking to me.

Reid and I planned to go to a friend's birthday this weekend. We let Milo know days ago, and he was okay with it. Last night, he changed his mind about me going.

Reid and I planned on staying over at our friend's place. Mia also had a sleepover. When Milo realized the house would be empty, he decided I could no longer see my friend on her birthday, prompting me to tell Reid I had too much homework. I didn't.

Milo was boxing me in, and there was not a thing I could do about it. I didn't hold any power in this situation and had to do as he said. He often got angry if I countered with a different option. His fuse was so short nowadays that I was constantly on edge. I wasn't allowed to voice an opinion over the progression of this situation.

It was so damn frustrating.

Then Milo decided to sprinkle romance on top of this mindfuck.

Tonight, he cooked dinner for me—lasagna, my favorite. He also ordered my favorite desserts and set up a romantic ambiance, completed with background music.

I didn't know how to take any of this. He wanted to fuck me all the time, every second we were alone. He fucked me until neither of us could breathe or move from exhaustion. He took away the most cherished aspect of our relationship—our conversations. He never wanted to talk to me, yet he left no room to breathe or talk to anyone else.

Then he threw a romantic gesture my way.

Was that my consolation prize for putting up with this shit?

Milo made the decisions in my life. He was the experienced one, so why hadn't he disclosed more on the topic? He had provided me with no explanation as to why he was pursuing a sexual relationship with me. His confident approach to what we were doing continuously made me doubt my sanity.

As soon as dinner ended, I told him I had a Skype call scheduled with Dad. He didn't argue. Thank God for it because I needed to talk to my parents. I needed advice and direction from an adult.

I didn't have to tell them what was going on with Milo. I could keep it vague, tell them I was having boy problems. I just needed to hear their voices.

It was ten p.m., which meant it was four a.m. in Paris, and five a.m. in South Africa. Shockingly, both of my parents were up at this ungodly hour. Mom was likely leaving a glamorous party, and Dad was waking up to start his shift.

Needing to talk to someone coherent, I Skyped Dad. After three missed Skype calls, I tried his phone, which was still forwarded to his virtual assistant.

"I am so sorry. Mr. Beckett can't come to the line," she informed.

"Oh, okay. Can you tell him that I need to talk to him? It's urgent." I was falling apart and hoped she could hear the desperation in my voice.

She was quiet for so long that I worried she disconnected the phone. "Let me page him and see what he says. What's the best call-back number?"

She should have my number, considering how many messages I had left. He should also have his only daughter's phone number. Regardless, I left my number and hung up.

I waited for a call. Nothing.

I tried Mom next. I called her phone while changing into my sleeping gear. No response.

Finally, I heard my phone ding—a text from my mom.

Mom: Can't talk right now, darling. Busy. I'll call when I am free.

Busy meant getting drunk with celebrities at a fashion show after-party. Not surprisingly, Mom didn't ask why I had called so late.

I needed my parents. Not in a few minutes, not when it was convenient for them, not when they were ready to face me. I didn't care about their heartbreaks, their dreams, or their insecurities. I wanted to be selfish. I needed them to put me first.

I stared at my phone, willing it to ring. No call or text came through. Minutes passed by before I blinked away the tears.

I was alone in this world. Generally, I didn't mind being alone. I enjoyed my space. Being creative. Doing things only I liked. However, I hated feeling lonely, having no one to talk to or bare my soul to. I loathed it with all my might.

Suddenly, I was the same thirteen-year-old girl who moved to New York. Lost. Sad. Lonely. As usual, only one person was here with me.

Leaving my useless phone behind, I strode toward Milo's room.

"Is everything okay?" he frowned. Surely, he could tell from my expression that I was on the verge of tears. He jumped out of his desk chair and pulled me into a hug.

Milo closed the door and lifted me. He sat on the bed with me on his lap as I nestled into his warm hold, silently seeking comfort on his large chest.

"Your dad didn't pick up," he guessed. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," I responded harsher than intended.

Milo looked surprised by my tone but quickly masked his expression. "It's okay," he said quietly. "I understand. I won't push you."

He understood why I couldn't talk about my parents. I didn't need them. Despite our new dynamic's shortcomings, I was glad Milo was here.

Otherwise, I'd be completely alone. I sought parental guidance tonight. I found it from the only man who was always here.

Milo. Of course, it was fucking Milo picking up the pieces after my shithead parents.

Right now, I didn't care if things changed for the worse between us or if Milo didn't open up to me anymore. I couldn't bring myself to care if this was wrong or if Reid might be pissed. I wouldn't even care if Mr. Alpert and his family were to walk in, gasping in disgust.

I. Didn't. Care.

I didn't want to be alone anymore. I was tired of being alone. Milo and his electrifying touch could make my loneliness go away. My body had instinctively learned to react positively to him. I was putty in his hands as soon as he touched me. Maybe it was because he was my first. I was sure initial sexual experience defined what we liked in bed.

Or maybe it's because it was Milo. I might be new to this, but I was experienced enough to recognize that he was incredible in bed. I was glad to have him as my guide into the sexual realm.

Milo was shirtless with a pair of sweatpants that hung low. His chest was warm, perfectly golden tan, and smooth with few hairs. I placed my palm on his chest. He was beautiful, like a sculpture, and I wanted to touch him everywhere.

The way Milo watched only encouraged me. Flicking my tongue out, I licked him from his pectoral muscles and lowered to my knees to lick his six-pack. I traced his perfect V with my fingers before running my tongue over it.

Grabbing hold of his sweatpants, I slid them down. My fingers closed around the base of his thick shaft, and when I saw a drop of precum, I leaned over instinctively to lick it off.

"God," he mouthed, looking in agony from the slow burn.

My thoughts, the previous meltdown, and the feelings of rejection faded away. Feeling wanted, admired, and confident, I leaned over for long slow licks, using both my hands to grasp him from the base. I stroked while sucking him off until I felt his erection straining. Rising to my feet, I wiggled out of my shorts.

Milo grabbed me, pulling me closer to straddle him. He positioned me over his length as my wet lips rubbed against him. Staring deep into his eyes, I took hold of his dick. I wanted to be in charge, and from the looks of it, Milo didn't mind.

I guided him inside, putting my hands on his shoulders to lower myself onto his cock. I worked his hard length inch by inch, adjusting and rotating for my pleasure.

"Oh, my God," I panted.

"Fuck, baby." Milo put one hand around my waist to guide me, but I brushed his hands off. I wouldn't let him control today's session.

Instead, I guided his hand to my clit, so he could rub the right spot while I rocked against him. My body clenched, his dick throbbing and pulsing inside me.

"Raven, I want to hear you come," he said, out of breath, taking my lips between his teeth.

"Then don't stop."

My eyes were unfocused, hands clamping as Milo increased the tempo on my sensitive spot. I rode him until my body could no longer hold off. I dug my nails into his chest as I convulsed, sobbing in elation.

"That's it, baby. Come for me," he murmured. Both his hands landed on my hips to ground me further, extending my orgasm.

"Milo, oh God," I cried out.

Milo railed into me, thrusting his dick upward. My moans brought on his climax. Grabbing my hair, he let go with a shout, "Fuck, Rave."

My face landed in the crook of his neck. A few moments later, Milo lifted me slightly to pull out. I was unaware of being carried as he gently dropped me on the bed. He moved to my side and pulled me into a spooning position before drawing the comforter on us. When awareness returned, I found his head resting against my neck.

“That was amazing,” he murmured with eyes closed.

He was right.

Maybe I was acting like a horny teenager, but I had never experienced something so powerful and mind-numbing. It stopped my worries, my self-esteem issues, and my abandonment issues.

What we were doing was wrong and immoral and would destroy our lives if we were found out. It was probably illegal, too. I couldn’t imagine the law allowing foster fathers to sleep with their wards; technically, that was Milo’s role in my life. There was a daunting expiration date looming over our heads. Not to mention, my complicated feelings over how Milo had been treating me as of late.

Nonetheless, I couldn’t deny Milo’s words. Sex between us was amazing. It had become mind-blowing.

Downright addicting.

BONUS CHAPTER



Raven

I tightened my hold around the quilt me as I browsed online. Loud voices drifted through the hardwood floors above my head. Reid and Mia were chatting with their cousins, excited to catch up.

Milo rented a car to visit Delaware and New Jersey for a Sinclair family reunion weekend. His uncle lived in New Jersey and hosted the first night, while his aunt lived in Delaware and opted to host the dinner tomorrow night.

Milo's uncle was a sworn bachelor with a big home and no family to fill it with. So, he offered his house to the out-of-towners driving in for the occasion. I volunteered to sleep downstairs, which was far more private. The couch in the basement was comfortable, and there was Wi-Fi to keep me entertained. Milo refused to leave me behind in New York, but I wanted to allow the Sinclairs an opportunity to catch up with their family.

I mindlessly surfed social media, but nothing caught my attention. What finally caught my attention was the creaking of the steps leading to the basement. I realized someone was descending the stairs.

I froze, fingers wrapped around the edge of my blanket, as Milo hopped off the last step and came into view. My head inadvertently tilted to see if anyone else followed him.

He paused, craning his neck as if searching for someone. The basement was dimly lit, and I was off to one corner. Milo twisted his body, his eyes finally landing on me. I almost jumped from the intensity he wore, impatience written in his fibers.

“Rave.” His voice was deep and warm, mixed with relief. His eyes scanned my tank top, the only part of me visible as the quilt covered my lower half. Underneath, I wore my usual sleeping gear—shorts and a tank top—while Milo hadn’t changed out of his gray t-shirt, hoodie, and dark jeans.

“Milo, what are you doing down here?” I whispered, ripping my eyes away from his flexing biceps as he crossed his arms over his chest.

We hadn’t had much interaction tonight. Milo’s uncle rented a private room in a restaurant for the reunion. It was a ploy to confine the younger members safely while the older generation drank at the bar. They dragged Milo along. Even from a distance, I noticed a few friendly women approaching him at the bar. The guy I was sleeping with was being blatantly hit on, as it often happened with Milo, and I had no idea how to feel about it. However, I knew enough not to bring it up, as it wouldn’t be a conversation he’d entertain.

Making his way to the couch, Milo sat next to me. I sat cross-legged with the computer on my lap, a quilt draping over my body.

“Share your blanket with me.” Milo tugged at the throw as I set my laptop on the coffee table. “Come here,” he ordered, opening his arm with an invitation to cuddle.

My gaze shifted to the staircases, and I shook my head in mortification. He was insane. Anyone could walk down those stairs.

Milo closed his eyes as if reigning in frustration. “Rave... I’m tired. I can’t do this right now. For God’s sake, just come here.”

Taking in his swollen eyes, I reluctantly scooched. Milo wasted no time wrapping his arm around my middle to drag me closer until my legs and thighs were on his lap. He readjusted the throw, so we were both under it in an unbelievably compromising position.

Milo contentedly dug his nose into my hair. “Much better,” he murmured, his lips lingering on my pulse.

My breath hitched when he kissed my neck, eyes drifting to the stairs. “Milo—”

He tilted his head, catching my lips with his. Milo groaned, and his tongue lewdly stroked against mine in an instant, hand squeezing my breast to set everything ablaze. His cock jerked against my ass. The hand on my breast shifted to my thighs, pressing them down so he could ground his dick against my pussy from underneath.

There was no guesswork needed about what he wanted.

“Milo, they’ll hear us.” I leaned away from him, but Milo followed me to get me on my back. I pressed a hand on his chest to keep him at bay.

This situation was turning riskier by the day. We were living on the edge. Our dirty secret might come out any day to taint the lives of everyone we knew and loved. Milo seemed to have foregone his usual self-control, but one of us had to start making better decisions.

“We’ll be quiet,” he said unconvincingly, desperation pounding through him.

It had been a couple of days since we were together. I knew from experience that he wouldn’t settle for an easy fix. It’d be rough and loud despite his cousins, aunts, and uncles mingling in the living room above our heads. Their voices carried down the stairs, the sound mixing with our harsh breaths.

“We can’t,” I said hoarsely, though I recognized the look on his face. One that indicated he was too far gone and unable to focus on anything else.

“Can’t wait, Rave,” he countered in a strangled voice. His hand slid to my inner thighs to part them. He rubbed his palm against my clit, and his dick throbbed underneath me. The double assault had my head spinning. His heart slammed under my palm, resting on his chest, and I knew he could feel the throbbing ache of my pussy.

“Not here. Anyone can walk in,” I protested.

Milo blew out a relented sigh against my cheek, barely rasping out, “The car. It’s parked in the driveway.”

I didn’t argue, knowing it was the safest of the two. It was dark out, and no one would hear us unless we were screaming our heads off.

“Okay,” I said quickly to remove us from the situation. “Let’s go through the basement.” I barely nodded at the basement door when Milo yanked the quilt off me and threw me over his shoulders like a sack of potatoes.

“Milo!” I hissed in warning. “Put me down.”

He ignored me, charging the door with only one mission in mind. Opening it with force, he practically sprinted to the car parked at the end of the driveway.

I vaguely lifted my head to watch him pull out the keys from his pocket. He flung open the door to the back seat before throwing me inside. The leather seat was cold, but I couldn’t focus on the temperature with Milo taking off his hoodie and climbing in. I scooted back instinctively, but he grabbed my arm and pulled me to his lap, facing away from him. I stared out the console window, heart careening at his low grumble.

Lifting me slightly, Milo yanked my shorts and panties down enough to feel me raw. His hand slid inside.

“Oh, God,” I moaned lowly, my eyes fluttering.

Milo groaned when he felt my wet folds welcoming him in. My head almost hit the car’s roof when he unbuckled his jeans, one hand between my thighs while the other pushed his jeans and boxers down. His pulsing cock

slid between my thighs as he shifted me into position, ripping another moan out of me.

“Move your head back. I want your lips.”

Distracted, I leaned into the hollow of his neck and turned to face him. Milo took my lips insatiably, sucking on my tongue as he forced his cock inside me.

“Mmhmm,” we moaned into each other’s mouths simultaneously.

He held me with a hand wrapped around my middle. His other hand parted my folds, circling my clit unbearably slowly as he pounded into me from behind. I rocked against him, barely able to breathe between his cock stretching me and his vulgar tongue ravaging my mouth. My walls squeezed as his fingers identified a spot that had me clenching. I tampered down to hold off just as Milo rolled his hips.

Unable to take it, I ripped my mouth off his, struggling to breathe. An earth-shattering climax rippled as he palmed my swollen cunt, and I parted my lips to scream. Milo slapped a hand over my mouth while I rode it out, my soaking wetness between us.

I blacked out, head landing in the crevice of his neck, whimpering. Tears leaked out as I stared at the roof of the car. It was dark while Milo kneaded my tits and growled his climax.

“Fuck, yeah.” He latched onto the back of my neck to muffle his sounds, making me yelp. I bit my bottom lip as Milo thrust up again to take me any way he saw fit. Milo spread my legs wider and kept ramming into me until he emptied himself.

We sat in that position for God knew how long, unable to move or speak. His face was buried in my hair while my head was knocked back against his chest. Limbs numb and aching.

Sex with Milo had changed me. My brain screamed that we were crazy to think we could keep this up. Yet, every fucking time—no matter how many

times we did it—it was always the same. Earth-shattering and never enough.

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CHAPTER 7

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OCTOBER 2015



Raven

I WAS A CRAZY PERSON. I WAS SURE OF IT. MY HEAD FELT LIKE IT WAS being fucked with, though it was my body taking the fucking. Sometimes, I wondered if everything happening with Milo was a part of my delusions. There was no way it could be real.

Milo acted calm and collected in front of others. We still had movie nights and family dinners. The other day, he went to my PTA meeting. He dutifully met with my teachers and asked my counselor questions about my chances for FIT. Then he took me home for an "afternoon delight." He could turn it on and off while I was drowning and going insane.

Now I was reminded that it was real and not part of my imagination.

I was in the hallway leading to Milo's room. I slept in his bed last night and only wore one of his oversized sleeping shirts. I was in the process of sneaking back when Mia appeared out of nowhere.

"Mia." I jumped, caught off guard.

"Hey, Rave. What are you doing?"

I was dumbstruck. What am I doing? I wasn't close enough to the hallway bathroom door to use it as an excuse. Then again, I had a bathroom in my room.

I had no idea how to explain it, so I tried the half-truth.

"Nothing. I was just saying bye to Milo."

Milo left for the weekend. I vaguely recalled being woken up at an ungodly hour of the morning to be kissed goodbye. He was skipping his weekly lectures to go out of town and meet with investors. The nanny was staying here in his absence to take care of all household-related chores.

"Oh, okay." She eyed my shirt, or rather Milo's shirt, and my bare legs.

"I'm going back to sleep. It's still early."

"Okay," Mia repeated.

She didn't believe me; I could see it in her eyes. This wasn't a close call. It was the call—the wake-up call I had been anticipating.

Turning the corner, I rushed inside my room and shut the door. A bucket of cold water had been dumped over me, dousing my libido. Unsure of what to do, I spent the morning locked in my room. I needed to talk to someone about this, but who?

I couldn't talk to Reid.

I couldn't talk to Mia.

Dad wouldn't return my calls.

Mom barely texted me back.

I couldn't talk to any of my school friends or family friends, either.

Milo was entrenched in my life. Everyone knew how we were related. The thought of anyone finding out about our intimate moments made bile rise in my throat. As great as the physical connection might be, I could barely admit it to myself. I'd be horrified if others found out. I couldn't talk to

Milo, either. Unless we were having sex, he was aloof. I had no idea how to reach him anymore, leaving me feeling lonely.

I thought things might be different with my parents after the summer, but they broke my heart all over again. Sex with Milo had been filling the void. It was a sickness I craved—attention from Milo or my parents. As a result, I had been overlooking my other concerns.

However, I could no longer ignore those concerns. I was lonely again, and this time it was because of Milo. I wanted things to return to how they were. This relationship had run its course for me, but I had a feeling that wasn't the case for Milo. He seemed insatiable, rougher, and hungrier each time we were together. Marks and bruises were becoming more and more frequent with every tumble.

My thoughts were interrupted by a knock. "Can I come in?" Mia peeked through the door.

In all the time I had lived here, Mia had never asked permission to enter my room.

She knows.

I didn't know what I'd do if she confronted me. "Of course," I said in a small voice, bracing myself.

Mia was only thirteen. How much of this adult stuff did she understand?

I recalled myself at thirteen and realized Mia knew more than enough. Many girls in my grade were already sexually active by then. New York was the fastest city in the world, and the kids were just as fast.

"What were you really doing in Milo's room this morning?" Mia got right to the point.

"I told you—" I had barely started when Mia cut me off harshly.

"Stop lying, Raven!" Mia snapped.

My jaw dropped. For the second time, a Sinclair had spoken to me in a way they had never done before.

"I know you and Milo are hooking up." Lost for words, I stared at Mia, who stumped me again by asking, "Are you guys fucking?"

My eyes almost bugged out. "What! Of course not," I replied without hesitation. I had never lied to Mia before, but I was desperate.

Mia eyed me suspiciously, deciding if she should believe me. A thirteen-year-old was making me feel like I was on time out. "I came to your room in the middle of the night, but you weren't there. I searched all over, then heard your voice coming from Milo's room. Milo always makes a point to keep the door open when you're in there. The door was closed, then I saw you in Milo's shirt. You do know that I'm a teenager, right? We understand these things."

Yes, I was aware.

I remember my freshman year of high school. Girls were having sex like it was a regular part of dating. The movie, *Thirteen*, was a relatively accurate depiction of how much thirteen-year-olds understood. It made the situation mortifying.

She heard me. She heard me while I was in his room, doing God knows what at the time. Shame wasn't the only thing coursing through my veins. Fear came next.

"What did you tell Reid?"

"Are you asking if I divulged my suspicions to him? I wouldn't do that."

I let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you," I managed to croak. "It's not what you think."

"Did you sleep with Milo?" she asked again.

Mia believed me to be a virgin. I was the one to give her a sex talk. Even if she saw or heard me, it was believable that we had abstained from sex.

"I stayed in his bed a few times."

"But you didn't have sex."

"No." I averted my eyes and fixated on the closed door. I didn't know what to say or how to explain, but Mia did it on my behalf.

"Rave, we all love you. My dad, my brothers, me, and even my sick mom. When you joined our family, I was so excited that we finally became real sisters. But I never thought you'd let something like a silly crush ruin this family."

Mia stared at me with utter disappointment and anger. I had seen her cut down enough nannies who dared to walk through our doors and knew she could be ruthless if properly motivated. She was well-spoken and could use her words to her advantage. Mia had a fear of public speaking. In Milo's fix-it mode, he enrolled her in a Toastmasters for Kids. The organization gave her fierce confidence and an extensive vocabulary. I never thought I'd be on the receiving end of her sharp tongue or her fury.

I could deal with her words, but the look she wore... I couldn't deal with it. Feeling as if I had been struck, I whispered, "Please stop."

"No. You need to listen to what I have to say. I might be young, but I'm not stupid. I get that your parents left you, but so did mine. I also had to grow up. So, you can't use that card to get out of this."

I stared at her silently. Mia had already put a knife in my heart; she only had to twist it.

Mia continued her tirade. "Milo used to tuck me into bed. Once you moved in, I often noticed you standing at the doorway to watch up. Reid used to die of jealousy watching you stand there. He hated how you yearned for Milo's attention."

I wasn't staring all those times because I yearned for Milo's attention. I was sad. Mia had someone who cared enough to tuck her in. I'd watch Milo talk to Mia. He'd ask about her day and what she learned in school. It made me miss my parents and the good old days when they tucked me into bed.

Like the whole world, Mia misunderstood my feelings. She thought I had an unhealthy obsession with Milo. Or so I presumed, until she surprised me with her perceptiveness.

"I knew you weren't staring because you were pining after Milo. You were sad about your parents and craved the attention Milo gave us. You sought him out because he was the last parental figure you had left."

Mia's insight shocked me. Being the youngest family member, she never interfered with the ongoing family drama. I never realized she was so observant.

"But Reid didn't see it that way. Jealousy changed him, turning him into a different person. Angry. Always lashing out. Rebellious. He and Milo used to be so close, but they drifted apart. You and Reid are attached in a codependent way. He doesn't know who he is without you, so he hates Milo for taking you away. You broke their bond."

My eyes snapped to Mia's. She strode closer and sat in my desk chair.

"I knew it wasn't intentional. I just assumed you'd snap out of it and realize Milo is only a person, not this god you make him out to be. He was forced into a difficult role and stepped up to the plate. We love him for it, but he can't live up to your unrealistic expectations. Milo can't replace your parents, Rave."

Her eloquent words stunned me. I didn't argue. Mia wanted her say, and I owed it to listen without interruption.

She looked at me for a long while as if choosing her words carefully. Her voice turned softer. It was so husky that I could barely make it out. "Milo's just a boy a few years older than you. He thought a pretty girl liked him, and he started liking her back. Reid thought he was losing you to Milo. It's not surprising that they misunderstood the situation. They're both clueless when it comes to women. We have an insane mother. Neither of them has had a healthy relationship with a woman. No one to set an example."

She was right on all accounts. I couldn't believe she read the situation so accurately. It sounded like she was the only one to see things as they were. Despite her age, Mia was more mature than us. The rest of us are emotionally stunted, constantly misreading signals or sending out mixed ones, never having an adult to guide our emotional development.

Mia was an exception because she had Milo.

"I don't know exactly when things turned for Milo," she murmured. "He masks his emotions so well that it's impossible to know what he's thinking. I can read him at times because he raised me. It was clear to me that he was attracted to you. I'd notice his eyes light up whenever you walked into a room."

This was news. I didn't realize Milo's attraction was long-standing. He had never indicated it.

Mia noticed my perplexed face and answered the unspoken question. "I can't comment on the depth of his attraction. I only know that he wants you."

She swung in my revolving chair before standing to pace. Mia stopped to pierce me with sad, blue eyes, looking ready to make up her mind. I waited.

"But you don't know what you want from Milo." She narrowed her eyes, some of her previous irritation returning. "So, why are you doing this, Rave? You can date anyone. Milo's the only person Reid doesn't want to share you with, not to mention how much it would hurt both of our families. He's your guardian, your parent on paper. Everyone we know will gossip and tear our lives apart if this gets out. And if things don't work out between you two, it will tear this family apart, too. If you aren't in love with him, why the hell is this worth it?"

Now that Mia expected an answer, I was silent. I had no answer because she was right.

"It's not," I admitted.

I took a deep breath, preparing my speech. I had to lie to Mia once more because I couldn't acknowledge the extent of our illicit relationship. I was unsure if I could dodge her line of questioning as she caught me in a compromising situation. I had to admit to some things while avoiding the larger truth.

"You're right. The three of us are clueless about healthy relationships. But you're wrong about Milo and me. Milo was attracted to me, but it dissipated over the summer. We had some misunderstandings before I left for Paris. I won't bore you with the details, but Milo was upset that I left abruptly. After I returned, he wanted us to work on rebuilding trust. We've been having intense conversations about how to move forward, and we wanted to speak without an audience. He has been closing the door so that we can hash it out. We concluded that we were good friends, and it was misplaced feelings."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive," I replied without hesitation. "This won't affect our family, I promise. You know how I calm Milo when he gets anxious? He misunderstood it for attraction. He got confused. Milo is allowed to make mistakes, too."

I never knew myself to be such a good liar. Though I was lying through my teeth, I vowed to turn these lies into truths. I'll end it with Milo the moment he returns.

Mia's eyes softened, but her guard was still up.

I continued. "Come on, we all know Milo only does the friends-with-benefits thing. That's so not my style." I used my hands animatedly to get my point across. Hand gestures were valuable tools for winning arguments.

"But this morning—"

"I fell asleep in Milo's bed. I know it's inappropriate, but you must know it's innocent. We used to fall asleep in his bed when we were younger. Now that we're older, it's hard to remember the boundaries."

Mia glanced unsurely at my profile. I was hell-bound on convincing her before she walked out of the door.

"Do you feel weirdness or tension when you see Alexa?"

"No, but—"

"Milo and Alexa used to sleep together, and there's zero weirdness between them. Milo and I didn't even do anything. I wouldn't do that to Reid." The last sentence took all my soul to spit out. I was a horrible, despicable human being.

"Okay, if you're sure things will return to normal," Mia said unsurely.

"It will," I asserted. "Mia, I'm a mess. All of us are fuckups except for you. I'm sorry I slept in Milo's room and crossed boundaries. And I'm sorry that I made Reid angry by choosing Milo over him. I'll make sure everything is normal moving forward. Please don't be mad at me."

"You don't get it. It's not me you should be worried about."

"What do you mean?"

"Come on, Rave. Do you really not know?"

I dumbfoundedly stared at Mia as she further shattered my world with her next bit of information. As if there weren't enough reasons, her news hammered the nail into the coffin over why I should have never started anything with Milo, nor could it happen again.



Today was D-Day. Milo was coming home.

I was back from school and waiting impatiently for Milo. I had been preparing my speech all weekend and didn't want to put it off any longer. Reid wasn't home, and Mia was at a friend's house. It's now or never.

Over the last few days, I had barely spoken to Milo. He had been busy with meetings and presentation prep, so the timing hadn't worked out between my school, study groups, and dance classes. I dutifully dodged his text messages, keeping replies short and cordial. I wanted to speak to him in person, not over the phone.

Mia and I haven't had more serious conversations since the confrontation. As far as she was concerned, this matter was behind us. Despite the lies I

gritted out, I'd make it right.

I stared at the front door, willing it to swing open. As if on cue, it did. In came all of Milo's six-foot frame. He seemed tired with puffy eyes, but his face lit up when he saw me. The smile was sincere. So much so that I almost lost my nerve at the thought of disappointing him.

Then his eyes darkened as he took in my school uniform. It wasn't different than what I regularly wore. It was nothing over the top sexy, either, like the outfit Brittany Spears made famous in her music video.

Nonetheless, he eyed me hungrily and charged toward me with dark energy. I could feel his sheer want directed at me, ready to ravish, prepared to mark me as his. Heat resonated through him as his desire engulfed and suffocated the room.

Instinctively, I ran around the coffee table. "Stop."

He stopped. Milo froze, surprised by my hostile tone. "Raven." He frowned. "What's going on?" He stayed put, which was good. I needed distance to have this conversation instead of being distracted by the physical component.

I steeled my nerves and squared my shoulders. Instead of rambling, I needed to get straight to the point. "This—this thing between us isn't working. And right now, I don't want you coming any closer."

Milo looked taken back and... hurt. Damn. I hated this. "What? What do you mean?"

"Whatever was happening between us, it's over," I said determinedly.

"No, it's not." Milo narrowed his eyes, his voice eerily steady.

I looked straight into his eyes, refusing to back down. "Yes, it is. We are over."

"No, we most definitely are not." His voice rose as he enunciated each word.

I stared at Milo. I might not have all the experience in the world with men, but I knew if one party wanted to end things, the other didn't have a choice in the matter.

"Milo. I-I um," I stammered. He always managed to make me feel like a child. I took a deep breath. "We need to end it now before this gets out of control. Mia suspects something is going on between us. She caught me coming out of your room, and she can tell you want me. I convinced her it was nothing, but it was too close of a call."

Milo nodded, the severity of our situation setting in. "You're freaking out because Mia might know something."

"Of course, I'm freaking out over it. What kind of question is that?"

Milo looked hurt. Again.

I hated this conversation so damn much, and it softened my tone. "It's too complicated. I don't want to risk what we have here. It's better if we go back to how it was."

"I don't want to go back to how it was. I'll tone it down around Mia. We'll be more careful from now on."

"No," I hurriedly countered as panic settled in. I wiped my clammy hands on my skirt. He was making me feel like an insane person for making rational decisions.

Milo lifted a hand to run it through his hair, studying me suspiciously. "Is this about something else? Did I do something wrong? I know I've been away, but I tried to call and text as much as I could—"

"It's not that," I cut him off quickly. "It's nothing you did." I couldn't bear to see the agony on Milo's face, but I had to stay on course. I didn't want to be his fuck buddy. Why was that so hard to believe?

I looked around the room, praying for divine intervention to make him understand. "Look, we tried the whole friends-with-benefits thing, but I have outgrown it. You are one of my closest friends and legally my guardian. We have to live in the same house, so let's be adults about this."

Milo gaped at me like I'd lost my mind. "What the hell, Raven? Do you think I risked everything to have a fuck buddy? You think that's what we are?"

"Not anymore."

"This is not about sex," Milo yelled. He breathed heavily to steady his temper. He spoke in a lower but still angry tone. "Where the hell is this coming from?"

I narrowed my eyes. Was he trying to pretend I was the most oblivious person on earth? "You sleep around with your female friends. Then you guys go back to being friends. The only type of relationship you do is friends-with-benefits," I declared, throwing the condescending tone back at him.

"You know about my past?"

"Everyone does."

Milo stared at me for a long moment. "Yes," he started apprehensively, "I did sleep with some of my female friends. Not all, but a few. I'm not proud of it. They don't have to be in my life if it makes you uncomfortable. I don't want anything from them other than a cordial friendship."

"Why can't you extend the same respect to me?" I asked. "I would also like the courtesy of a friendship."

"For God's sake, Raven, you are not my fuck buddy. I'm not that desperate for sex. You're the one who teases me about my groupies, remember? If that's all I wanted, you must know I have other options." Milo sounded incredibly frustrated.

He looked into my eyes, piercing me with his green orbs.

"Rave, I'm sorry if I gave you that impression," he said softly. "You're not my fuck buddy," he repeated. "You are just mine. I love you. I always have. I'm so in love with you that it hurts. And you love me, too. You told me so yourself. How can you compare what we have to those girls? You're so

emotionally damaged that I don't know how to reach you sometimes. I thought you understood how I felt." He shook his head. "I thought wrong."

It was my turn to gape at Milo like he had grown three heads. I didn't have a sensible comeback to his proclamation.

Milo couldn't love me. Not like that. It was impossible.

Mia's words came back to me. She said Milo's attraction took root because he thought I was into him. If I told him the truth, maybe his feelings would fade, and we'd move on from this ugliness. We had to move on for everyone's sake.

"Milo," I spoke softly. "I have to be honest with you. This was a huge misunderstanding. I'm not interested in you like that. I never was."

"I don't believe you for a second," he replied without hesitation.

He strode closer, reaching out for me. I stayed behind the round coffee table, using the circle as leverage to move away from his grasp.

"Milo, I made a mistake." I held up my hand, indicating for him to stay away. "I-I gave the wrong impression. Everyone thought I had a crush on you, but it wasn't the case. I never knew other people saw it that way. After I returned from Paris, things got out of hand before I realized it. This was all a miscommunication."

Even as I said it, it sounded insane.

Echoing my sentiments, Milo bellowed, "Are you fucking kidding me?" He yelled so loud that it was pin-drop silent when his voice died away. "We've been sleeping together this entire fall. You're telling me that was all a miscommunication?"

Milo glanced around manically, a tinge of desperation rolling off him. He had no idea what to make of this. He walked around the coffee table to reach me. Once more, I moved in the opposite direction, avoiding physical proximity. I'd melt into him otherwise.

"Please stop. Let me explain."

"Okay." Anger spewed from his eyes as he stopped pacing. Milo folded his arms across his chest. "Please. Go ahead, explain," he said sarcastically.

Ideally, he'd be seated and calm while we spoke. Unfortunately, I didn't have the luxury. I had to do this under Milo's unnerving gaze and tense posture.

"It was hard when my parents left," I started from the beginning. "They deserted me, and I had no one. When you offered to take over my guardianship, it meant the world to me. You meant everything to me."

Milo's eyes remained unforgiving, face entirely void of expression.

"I wanted to do everything I could to help you. Reid and Mia were giving you a hard time, and college was difficult. So, I picked up where I could to make your life easier. I didn't want to be another chore for you. I wanted you to be glad I joined this family and not regret your decision to be my guardian."

Milo appeared bewildered by my statements. "That never crossed my mind."

"I know that now," I said. "I didn't understand it before. So, I'd follow you around for an acknowledgment. I wanted to make you proud. You were my hero," I said with a sad smile and quickly added, "You still are."

"Okaaaay. Then what's the problem—"

"You're my hero because you are my guardian," I whispered, eyeing him tentatively. "That's how I see you. I didn't realize my looking for your approval would make it seem I had feelings for you. I swear, Milo. It wasn't like that. It wasn't until Reid and Mia brought up—"

"Reid suspects it, too?"

"No!" I shrieked. I steadied my voice and gave my head a sharp shake. "No," I repeated. "Reid's the one who made me realize my behavior was inappropriate. I was trying to be helpful. In reality, I acted like a fool. I assured him nothing was going on. Reid would hate me if he found out otherwise."

I paced on my side of the table. I felt Milo's eyes moving with me. I turned to face him with a need to portray my sincerest remorse.

"Everyone thought I was infatuated with you. Reid and Mia suspected the same and pointed out that I was sending mixed signals. I had no idea how other people saw it. That's why I left for Paris. I thought I was embarrassing myself and wanted to learn how to behave appropriately."

"Fine. You can make an excuse about your innocent gestures coming off as something more. Mixed signals. But there were no mixed signals while we were having sex."

"Milo, I didn't—" I trailed off, unsure how to explain it. "When I returned from Paris, you seemed so sure and confident about what we were doing. I didn't know what to do."

"Let me get this straight. You realized you were giving off mixed signals and ran away to Paris. After returning, you slept with me to fix the mixed signals you were giving off?"

He was right. Who in their right mind would do that, then let it go on for so long? I tried to explain it anyway.

"That first time we did it, you had a panic attack. You said you needed me. I went along with it because I love you, but I thought it was a one-time thing —"

"And all the other times?"

"I just—I don't know how things got so out of control. I know it's frustrating to hear. I'm sorry for being such a mess."

"You told me you loved me on the night of your birthday party," he muttered.

"And I do. I love you. Just not in that way. I later realized you might have misunderstood me. I thought you were sending me to Paris to shake off this crush, which I didn't even have."

"We kissed that night. Did you mean that differently, too?"

"What? We didn't kiss the night of my party." I frowned. I didn't know what he was talking about.

His eyes roamed my face. "I came to your room to talk to you. Then we kissed."

I was stunned. Then came the shame. He was going to hate this next part. "Shit, Milo. I was really drunk. Plus, Reid and I got high." I lowered my eyes. "I'm sorry. I don't remember us kissing."

"What the hell, Raven!" Milo blew up. "You promised me you'd never get blackout drunk. You promised to be safe. I let you drink wine at home. I let you drink at parties. I let you stay out. I give you so much freedom. I want to trust you, but you keep breaking my trust. Getting trashed. Smoking pot. Boys in Paris. What if someone took advantage of you in that state? Did you consider the consequences of your actions?"

"See, right there. Reason 101 why this doesn't work. I can't have an honest conversation with you. The lines between being a parent and a lover are severely blurred. You can't fuck me one minute and lecture me the next about drinking and smoking pot."

We glared at each other, but I gave in first.

"I'm sorry. You are right. Those weren't safe choices, and I shouldn't have done those things. It doesn't change the matter at hand. You are one of my closest friends. I should've been more upfront. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. I never want to lose you. I would like for us to go back to being friends."

"No," he said definitively.

"Milo, you can't say that."

Milo's eyes were hard with defiance. "I can."

"Milo, please."

He eyed me but said nothing more. Turning his back, Milo started toward the door.

"Milo, please don't be angry. Don't leave like this." I followed him, desperately trying to make him understand. "Please. I'm sorry. I am so sorry."

Milo opened the door before I could reach him.

"Milo, please!" I yelled as panic settled in. He was leaving me! I had lost him.

Milo didn't respond as he slammed the door, leaving me in a world of tears.

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CHAPTER 8

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NOVEMBER 2015



Raven

THE LAST FEW WEEKS HAD BEEN THE WORST OF MY LIFE. I HAD SIGNED UP for more study sessions than ever before, trying to keep busy. Wellington was one of those pretentious prep schools that allowed students to grow at their pace. This meant we could get ahead of the syllabus if we so pleased and be done with our school year earlier than scheduled. I was done with all my electives and cores. I could do a remote internship in Paris next semester and still graduate on time.

The thought was tempting. I was starting to feel out of my mind in New York City and this house. I needed to get away for the sake of my sanity.

It had been a couple of weeks since the big blowout with Milo. He walked out and hadn't returned since. After he left, Milo started a text thread with all three of us, making up an excuse for having to stay on campus for the next few weeks. Then he called the nanny to extend her stay. Milo gave the nanny specific instructions for things that needed to be done around the house. He also made her check up on Reid, ensuring he was home by dinner time on weekdays to finish his chores and schoolwork. Milo had kept an eagle eye on his brother and sister from afar.

I naively assumed Milo would return home sooner than later. Imagine my surprise when I learned that Uncle Reese and Tessa were returning from the Cayman Islands. Milo called Uncle Reese, saying he was overwhelmed with school and the new business. He had never asked Uncle Reese for help. Uncle Reese requested a leave of absence and took the first flight home. They'll be here for the month, and Milo isn't coming back anytime soon.

Milo still stopped by Mia's school on select days to walk her home or take her out for a milkshake. She also received daily phone calls from him, as did Reid.

I did not.

No calls. No texts. No responses to my calls or texts.

The first week after he left, my heart gave out whenever the phone rang, a text alert went off, or I heard the door, thinking it was him. I was even ready to sit through one of his endless lectures about drinking and safety.

I couldn't take the radio silence.

Why was it so unforgivable to want our old relationship back and for things to return to how it was? Given our relation to one another, Milo must've known there was an expiration date to our illicit affair. Still, I messaged him many times, begging for forgiveness. He never responded unless it was related to his responsibilities as my guardian or something to do with the household. His messages were curt and to the point.

It seemed this had more to do with Milo's ego and pride than hurt feelings. I didn't believe he loved me, as his actions had never hinted at it. Milo was an upfront guy. If he was interested in more than sex, he had plenty of opportunities to voice it. Only after I ended things did he magically decide he loved me.

I would have believed Milo had he said those words earlier. Throughout our short-lived "relationship," he stopped talking to me; all he wanted to do was have sex. We had no emotional connection. Was I supposed to believe sex was love?

I couldn't help but feel that Milo thought of me as so desperate for love that I'd have sex with him again if he said those words. His theory wasn't entirely unfounded. I gave up my virginity out of my love for him. Yet the moment I couldn't give him what he wanted, I ceased to exist to Milo.

This was so unfair. It wasn't my call to start a sexual relationship. Milo initiated it, so why was I being punished?

I hated it. I had been wallowing for weeks. I wanted to be angry at him, but I couldn't. No matter what, I could never hate Milo.

I hated Milo. There, I said it.

I never thought I'd think those words, but I did. I hated him.

It had been more than a month since Milo walked out. I had hoped we could fix things. Now, the hope had been replaced with anger. So much anger.

A few weeks ago, Milo picked up Reid and Mia after school to take them out for a family dinner. He conveniently chose a day when I had dance class. The same thing happened a few days later. Then it happened again.

To not cause suspicion, Milo started texting all three of us on our group thread, intentionally suggesting hang sessions on days I had dance practice, study sessions, or other commitments. I had no choice but to decline.

Soon, Uncle Reese joined these family dinners since this was the first time he wasn't actively working. The whole family, including Tessa at times, now regularly got together. I was deemed too busy to attend due to an overloaded schedule. Not only was Milo ignoring me, but he was making me feel left out of my family. He was alienating me, punishing me until I realized my harsh truth—I had no one unless he allowed it.

Milo's claim of loving me was a joke. You don't do that to someone you love. Milo wanted me for my body. Now that he had no more use for me, he was getting back at me for hurting his pride.

Yet, I was currently decorating the house for Milo's surprise birthday party tomorrow. I was an idiot.

I was making the same mistakes I did with my parents—getting my heart broken in exchange for crumbs of love. Except, it was worse with Milo. My parents were neglectful, but they didn't take anything from me. However, I gave Milo everything he wanted, and he left me the minute I put my needs before his.

The first week Milo left, I would have taken any opportunity to be around him. To make him see reason. Apologize again and again. Based on how he had been treating me over the last few weeks, I didn't want to be around him anymore. The last thing I wanted was to attend his stupid birthday dinner or the party afterward.

Yet, I put up decorations for the remainder of the night and stayed home alone on a Friday for one more man who broke me.



Milo

I chugged the remainder of my beer and waited for the buzz. It didn't come. This must be my fifth beer tonight, and my judgment remained unimpaired. Asher should ask for a refund from the liquor store. If I couldn't get tipsy at this party, this would be even more insufferable than I had imagined.

Reid and Raven organized my twenty-first birthday party and put Asher in charge of liquor since they needed someone over twenty-one to purchase it. Asher failed at his job. This shitty alcohol was defective, failing to have me buzzed.

The whole family, including my mother (shockingly), took me out for a birthday dinner. They had been planning this surprise party for months, scheduling an intricate family dinner beforehand to get me out of the house. Afterward, my parents arranged to take Mia and stay overnight at the Plaza. They gave us the place so it could be a proper rager. I knew about this party before the big reveal. It was obvious. I should be thrilled, but I hadn't been thrilled for some time.

Last month, I went out of town for a few days. I never would've left had I known how drastically things were about to change.

I was already out of my mind, missing Raven like crazy, by the time I returned. Raven was finally coming around, being more open and even initiating sex a few times. I thought we were on the same page until she pulled the rug from under me.

Raven told me she wasn't interested in me. Sleeping together was a huge misunderstanding. I was about to lose my mind.

That girl pursued me for years. Coming to my room, curling up in my bed, always calling and texting me. For God's sake, who gave up their virginity as part of a misunderstanding? None of it made sense. As if to twist the knife, Raven said she didn't mean it when she said she loved me.

She decided it was over without so much of a discussion. I couldn't listen to her anymore and walked away. Raven always needed time to process. It was my turn. I had to cool off before doing something I'd regret.

Then it hit me. Raven was freaking out because of Mia's suspicions. I should've shipped Mia off to boarding school when I had the chance.

Raven went in full denial mode, saying things to justify what had been happening between us—even denying her proclamations of being in love with me.

I decided to give her time to think about it and let her stew in her crazy mind.

It was for the best. I was still worried about other guys with Raven, as my trust issues hadn't evaporated. I asked Dad to come home for a month. Between him and the nanny, I could watch her from a distance. From what I heard, she hadn't been anywhere other than school, home, and dance classes.

Not surprisingly, I received a steady stream of texts and calls from Raven. I never responded unless they pertained to my responsibilities. I was letting her miss me for a change.

Not the most mature way of dealing with things, but I didn't know how else to make her see reason. No two people on this earth have had something as undeniable between them. I figured that by my birthday, she'd get things sorted in her head and conclude that we belonged together. She had to because I couldn't live like this anymore. I had suffered for years holding back from Raven. I couldn't do it again. I thought last summer without her was terrible. After having her under me, last summer was child's play in comparison.

I had been bunking with Brandon in the interim. Brandon wasn't the kind of guy who asked many questions. I had been skipping classes, drinking heavily, and drowning in misery in his spare bedroom. Brandon didn't ask what was wrong. It was precisely what I needed because I was in hell.

I meant it. This was—what I assumed—my hell would feel like. My mind was continuously raging; my heart ripped out every minute of the day. A party was the last thing I wanted after what I had been going through. However, today was the day I planned to get answers. I needed to make Raven face our reality.

Except, Raven had gone back to her personification of an ice princess. She kept the conversations light throughout dinner, barely making eye contact or acknowledging me. It was infuriating. It took everything to remain calm.

We returned to the house for a party I didn't want, with people I didn't care to see. I kept scanning the rooms for her face, but she had made herself scarce.

This party was wilder than usual because of Mia's absence. I was worried about what Raven might be up to. Thoughts of drugs and Raven with other men stirred my paranoia.

I didn't get the allure of these wild parties anymore. Beer pong. Keg stands. Getting your dick wet.

Why would I shoot a ping pong ball in a cup to encourage another asshole to drink? Why would I want someone to hold me upside down to drink beer? And I didn't need to be at a grimy party to get a half-drunk chick back to my place. There was only one person my eyes sought.

Raven had ruined me for other women. Even before we got together, fucking other women was hollow. I couldn't get off unless I thought of her. Empty fucks. At the time, I attempted to end my inappropriate feelings and move on from the girl who lived under my care. Now, I knew there was no one else for me. Other women ceased to exist the moment I was inside her.

However, the only person to hold my interest was nowhere in sight. It was worrisome. Half the assholes here whipped their heads in Raven's direction the moment she walked in. They didn't try to hide their leering eyes, and I could only stare down so many fuckers.

I wouldn't have these murderous urges if I could hold Raven's hand or make a public claim. These assholes would automatically get the message and move on to the next unsuspecting prey. Even if I couldn't make a public claim, it would give me a sense of solace if I knew she was mine behind closed doors. I didn't have that assurance anymore.

I needed to numb the agony. I needed a buzz to tolerate tonight until I could talk to Raven and fix things between us.

Annoyed, I chucked the beer can in the trash and roamed the house. Since Mia wasn't here, we allowed the herd to party in the main area except for the topmost floor where we slept. That was always off-limits.

My eyes searched for her once more when I heard the alert on my phone—a text from Reid.

Reid: Met a college hottie. Going back to her place. I'll be safe. Have a good birthday.

Milo: Ok, be safe.

I shook my head at the phone. Reid followed the rules I set. He came home on time on the weekdays and was honest about his whereabouts on the weekends. As long as he followed the rules, I couldn't stop him from sleeping around. At least I gave him the sex talk. I had to trust that I did right by him and he'd make good choices. God forbid the day came when I had to deal with Mia doing this crap. I couldn't fathom it.

Some of my anxiety returned as dark thoughts surrounding my siblings and an uncertain future with Raven haunted my mind. She was my salvation, my fighting chance against these thoughts. She was my drug of choice—a pure addiction—and right now, I needed a hit. I needed to see her.

I zigzagged through the rooms to ditch the prying claws of interested females offering themselves for birthday sex. Not interested. When would they learn? I hadn't shown interest in any of them for months.

My eyes searched for someone else. Finally, I spotted Raven. She stood outside the back entrance of the brownstone.

I took an uninterrupted moment to stare at her. I saw her only an hour ago, but it still felt like the first time. She was stunning—the epitome of an erotic Snow White. Her long jet-black hair hung low to her waist; her perfect, pale skin was warm and flushed.

The thin straps of her black dress highlighted her narrow shoulders while showing off a bit of cleavage. The dress stopped at mid-thigh. It could be modest were it not for her high-heeled shoes. The five-inch red bottom heels (no doubt another gift from Raven's absentee mother) propped up her legs and ass, making the dress drip with sexiness.

She was gorgeous. The most beautiful woman I had ever seen. The most beautiful thing on this planet. It was inhumane to stand here and not be able to touch her.

I heard her soft laugh, and my heart lurched. She was talking to someone, but I could only see her through the transparent screen door. The other person stood outside my view, blocked by the wall.

I started toward her but froze in mid-step. A set of lips were on her, a hand caressing her face.

What the fuck!

My legs carried me to the back entrance, swinging the door open with such force that the screen almost broke.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I shouted in her face.

Raven whipped her head in my direction in shock. "Milo—"

My hands were already in fists. I was about to kill the fucker who dared to touch her when it hit me that it was none other than Asher fucking Huntzberger.

Asher, who was a family friend and one of my best friends. Asher, who was one of my business partners. Asher, who was my age and went to Columbia with me.

"Shit, man. I'm sorry," Asher fumbled.

I grabbed Raven's arm, moving her behind me. I was going to kill Asher and bury him six feet deep.

"Listen, man, I know she's like your little sister—"

I didn't let Asher finish. I lost it for two reasons. First, the obvious: his lips were on Raven's. Second, he called her my fucking sister.

Grabbing the cocksucker by his collar, I got ready to end him. Asher's eyes were the size of saucers.

I blacked out as I threw punch after punch, whaling on Asher without direction. My vision was blurred. Most of them probably landed due to the blood on my fists.

I found Asher lying on the ground when my sanity returned. I only stopped because Raven had wrapped herself around the front of my body. I wanted to charge at him again, but she hugged my front and screamed. "Oh, God, Milo! Please stop. You're going to kill him. Are you fucking insane?"

"Yes," I shouted as I roughly grabbed her by the elbow and charged inside the house.

A crowd had already gathered around a badly bruised Asher lying on the ground. I saw a couple of our other friends coming to his rescue. There was a first aid kit in the bathroom, or they could take him to a hospital. I didn't care.

Mia and Raven were off-limits to these hounds. Everyone knew it, including Asher. They were told long ago; this was how it would end if they ever touched Raven or Mia. Those were always the house rules. No one would hold this against me since Asher was the one who fucked up.

I was too angry to care even if he didn't. I was shaking and could barely steady my temper. Leaving Asher to be dealt with by our friends, I dragged Raven inside.

"We're going upstairs," I growled in her ear.

Without giving her a chance to respond, I walked at a manic speed. She said a few confused words of protest but, in the end, focused on walking up the stairs in her high-heeled shoes.

Within a few minutes, we reached the topmost floor of our house.

"Milo, what the hell was that?" Raven demanded.

Instead of responding, I lead her through the hallway.

"Look, not that it's any of your business, but I think Asher had a lot to drink and got carried away. You should've respected me enough to let me deal with it," Raven continued. "Ash is not a bad guy; you know that. You shouldn't have done that. It was out of line."

Raven gave out an exasperated sigh.

"Can you please speak to me?"

"Don't ever say his fucking name again," I turned around and yelled so loudly that Raven looked terrified. How was that for a response?

I shouldn't scare her after beating a guy half to death in front of her, but I didn't care. She shouldn't be saying his name or calling him by a nickname like Ash, as if he had a place in her heart. The thought alone made me want to go back and murder him. Finish the job I started.

The events from tonight had my mind spiraling. The thought of seeing her with another guy made me see death.

My decision was made up—Raven was mine and mine only. I wouldn't allow her to keep living in denial. We belonged together. She needed to come to the same conclusion.

I wrapped my hand around her waist and led her to my room. I hauled Raven inside, closing the door and locking us in. I grabbed her and pushed her against the wall by the door.

"If he looks at you again, I'll kill him. I'll kill any fucker who touches you," I said quietly with immense anger.

Raven stared at me but stayed put. My frustration and rage took over, turning into predatory desire. I wrapped a hand around her waist and placed another on her cheek. I smashed my lips to hers, kissing her hard. I didn't leave an inch of doubt, licking her lips with my tongue.

When she didn't open her mouth, I placed a thumb on her bottom lip to pry it open, slipping my tongue inside. Her body trembled as I explored her with my hand, moving it up the side of her waist.

God, I missed this. I missed it so fucking much.

"Milo, stop." Raven put her hands on my chest, trying to create distance.

I was having none of it. Grabbing her hands, I pinned them on the wall as I burnt Raven with my eyes. "I'm the only one who's allowed to touch you. To feel you. To feel this."

Raven was paralyzed. Picking her up, I dropped her on my bed and grabbed at the hem of her dress.

"Milo, I can't!" Raven shrieked. "I already told you. I can't do this anymore."

"For fuck's sake, Rave. I know Mia gave you a scare, but you can't pull away like this. We want each other. This is no one else's business but ours."

"Milo—"

"Rave, I can't look at you, be around you, and not be with you. This is torture for me. You're so beautiful and perfect, and I miss you. I miss being with you. Don't you miss me?"

"Not like that, I don't," Raven looked down and muttered. "I'm sorry. I let this go on for too long. This is not only because of Mia. I don't want this."

"You do. You are overanalyzing it as you do with everything else."

"I'm not. Get it through your head—this is over."

"No, it's not." I grabbed her chin and returned to kissing her while slipping off her shoes.

I needed to connect with her. Needed to feel her squirm under me. It had been too long. I needed to remind her how good it was between us. I slid her dress with my hand, bunching it around her waist. Reaching for her black thong, I pulled it down.

Raven pushed at my chest again to create distance. Not happening. I grabbed her thighs as I sat between her parted legs.

"Milo, please stop."

"Please, baby, I need this," I groaned. "It's my birthday, and all I want is you."

I slid my hands up and down her naked thighs, my thumb brushing against her bare pussy every so often.

"No," Raven said firmly. I didn't budge. "No," she repeated, but this time let out a moan. She was distracted by my thumb teasing her core.

"What are you saying no to?" I whispered in her hair.

"I'm saying no to you. I don't want to fuck you. I don't want to be with you. I'm saying no to all of it," Raven breathed.

Gripping her hips, I circled her pussy again with my thumb. She moaned like I was creating an unbearable sensation using the friction of her smooth lips.

"How can you say that?"

She tried to push me off again, but I was double the size. Unmovable. "Milo, we can't. We talked about this."

"No. You talked, I listened," I murmured. "Now, listen to your body. Do you feel this?" Raven moaned as my fingers stroked her pussy. As predicted, she was soaking wet. "That's it, baby. Don't over-analyze this."

I turned my face to kiss her cheek. Raven fluttered her eyes shut and arched her back as I wrapped a hand around her waist, keeping the tempo with the other. Dutifully, I kissed her face, bit her jaw, and sucked on her neck, all the things Raven liked.

She looked lost. This was it. This was what I had been craving for weeks. Before then, I craved it for years. I couldn't stop now if I wanted to.

Out of nowhere, Raven screeched, shocking me out of my lust-high mind. "No!" She grabbed my wrist. "Enough, Milo. I don't want to do this anymore. I already told you that."

I was baffled. Did Mia's words have that much of an impact? I told her how I felt, but she was ready to give up on us because of a thirteen-year-old child.

I glared. "Your body is saying otherwise."

I pushed her onto her back, bracing her stomach with my hand. I stretched out over her lower body to eat her out.

"Milo, please stop. My word should be enough."

I didn't stop. Raven asked me multiple times; I should, but I couldn't.

There was an insatiable hunger in me that wouldn't let me stop. I needed to taste her, taste what was mine, and make her understand what she meant to me. It was an unbearable, mind-wiping, primal instinct that kept me going. My tongue had no finesse, going crazy on her pussy.

Raven's eyes closed. Her fingers landed in my hair, grabbing hard, reminding me of what she liked. "We can't—oh, God," Raven panted.

"We can," I said in between lapping at her. I used more techniques, finding the spot to make her squeeze.

"Fuck," Raven sobbed as her crescendo built, tears seeping out of her eyes. She yanked my hair, ready to pull them out.

Soaking wet tightness built up. Her back arched, eyes rolling back and fluttering. The silent scream from her parted lips increased with shuddering whimpers and cries. My fantasy was back to life, and the real thing was much more erotic than my dreams.

"Fuck. Fuck! Ah. I'm fucking—holy shit. I'm coming." And she did. Hard.

Raven tried to catch her breath as I worked my way up. I unfastened my jeans, pushing them down along with my boxers. Grabbing at the hem of my shirt, I pulled it over my head. I held onto Raven's thighs and pushed inside her.

Fuck. Me.

"Shit, baby. God," I grunted while kissing her like a starved man—her face, neck, and breasts. Lifting her thighs, I went as deep as I could.

This was heaven. This was home. Being with her filled my soul in a way I couldn't explain. She was my missing part. Without her, I'd always be incomplete.

I fucked her like a crazy man. Like a deprived man taking his fill. I pushed deep and pounded her ass into the mattress. My orgasm caught me off

guard, and I roared into her hair. The absence of her body brought on the most excruciating climax to date.

I pressed my forehead against hers, finally having had the fix I needed. We were breathing harshly as I pulled out and slumped on top. I held her tight, hoping to mold her into my body. I never wanted to let go.

Raven lay complacent on the mattress. I sat on my haunches to stare at the work of art. Staring at her had become my favorite pastime.

However, Raven refused to make eye contact, turning her face away and looking out the window. I stroked her hair and turned her face to me. She batted my hand away.

"You shouldn't have done that," she muttered so quietly that I almost missed it.

"Why?"

"I said no. You should've stopped."

"You were gripping my hair so hard I was scared you'd rip it out if I dared to stop," I deadpanned.

Raven didn't respond.

"It's never been like this with anyone. Even with your limited experience, you must know I'm right. You came within a minute of me going down on you." I raised my eyebrow and smirked.

Raven didn't respond. She slowly rose to get dressed. I watched her with apprehension. It sunk in that I fucked up tonight. I shouldn't have pushed her. I should've stopped when she asked.

She was calm, but there was an air about her telling me she was pissed. More than pissed.

As she finished, Raven creaked open the door. I wanted to tell her with all my soul not to leave. I'd fall apart again without her, but I stayed put.

Raven turned her head toward me and finally spoke, "Happy birthday, Milo."

With those words, she was gone, leaving me to drown in my misery once more.



Raven

Avoiding Milo required all my organizational skills. Since his birthday party, I had made it my life's mission not to be around him alone.

I told him to stop. I told him multiple times. Yes, my body responded to him, and once we started, I didn't protest anymore. He still should have respected my decision the first time I said no. Men were supposed to stop when you said no, right? I had never experienced otherwise.

I blocked the thought out. I had to if I wanted to keep living here since Milo had officially moved back. Instead, I justified his actions. After all, I was physically reactive when he went down on me. It didn't help that Asher kissed me, sparking Milo's jealousy.

What the hell was Asher thinking anyway?

One minute we were talking, and the next, he grabbed and kissed me. I didn't kiss him back. Along with giving the wrong signals, I must also be terrible at ending things with men.

I heard through the grapevine that Milo was kicking Asher out of their business. When they drew up the contract for the company, Milo was a fifty percent owner since he funded the initial expenses. The rest of them split the remaining percentages.

Milo came into his trust fund after his twenty-first birthday. He spoke to the family lawyer to give Asher a small sum of that money to buy him out. I was unsure of how he convinced Asher to sign the papers, but Milo had shown me how much of a force of nature he could be during his birthday

party. I spent the next day cooped up at Janeen's house. We weren't allowed sleepovers on school nights, so I grudgingly returned home and felt Milo's starved eyes taking me in throughout dinner.

Uncle Reese and Tessa were staying at the house until the Thanksgiving Holidays. Milo wouldn't try anything if his parents were in the house. Regardless, I had been sleeping in Mia's room as an extra security measure.

At other times, I kept myself busy. School. Dance classes. Study sessions. I also worked on my application for a remote internship next semester. The only hitch in my well-laid-out plan was Reid's new love interest. He met a college girl at Milo's party, and they had been spending a lot of time together.

Typically, I was Reid's wingman and found his conquests amusing. This time, not so much. I needed more defenses against Milo's out-of-control libido. There was safety in numbers. Reid couldn't have found a more inconvenient time to become serious with a girl. It was selfish thinking on my part, but I couldn't help it. Tonight was the perfect example. Since Tessa enjoyed her relaxing spa experience at the Plaza, Uncle Reese decided on a repeat to recreate another good day for his wife. He was taking Mia along with him, and I didn't have Reid as my buffer.

We didn't have school tomorrow. I tried to stay over at Janeen's house, but Milo crushed those plans. When Janeen's responsible parents called Milo to ensure I could stay over, he politely declined, stating I had forgotten our pre-existing family plans.

Lies.

Now, we were alone for the first time since his birthday. Milo walked his parents out, telling them to have a good time. I watched him lock the door, bracing myself.

Milo glanced at me. I didn't have to guess what was on his mind. It had been a few days since we had sex, and he was getting impatient. Eyeing the staircase, I marched toward it, intent on locking myself in my room for the rest of the night.

Milo charged behind, gripping my shoulders as I reached the top of the stairs. Turning me around, he gave me a shake. "Where are you going?"

"I-I—" I trailed off, unable to answer.

"We have to talk, Rave," Milo said sharply.

"About what?"

"Are you serious? About us. We've been sleeping together, remember?"

"So?" I challenged.

"So?" He sounded incredulous. "What's wrong with you? W-we have been sleeping t-together." It was Milo's turn to stammer. "I'm your first. You gave your virginity to me. What does that mean to you?"

"Milo, whatever happened between us is done." I ripped out of his grip, mostly because he let me go. "I can't change the past. We can only move forward. This," I wiggled a finger between us, "is over."

"That's what you think."

"Whatever." I tried to skate past him, but Milo blocked me, grabbing my waist. "Let me go."

"Why should I?"

"Because I know what you want, and I refuse to give in."

"What I want or what we both want?" Milo deadpanned.

"Please stop."

"Why can't you admit that you want me, too?"

I rolled my eyes and jerked out of his hold. My patience was running thin. "You seem awfully fixated on a short-lived relationship based on meaningless sex."

"And you seem awfully quick to forget about it." Milo glared. Then he sighed in defeat. "Look, Rave. If you were dissatisfied with the extent of

our relationship, I can do better. We can have whatever kind of relationship that makes you comfortable. Do you want to be my girlfriend? Do you want to tell people about us? Tell me what it'll take. Talk to me."

Milo seemed so hurt that my heart squeezed in a way I couldn't explain, but I refused to veer off course.

I didn't trust Milo anymore. All he wanted out of me was sex, despite me saying no multiple times. I didn't believe Milo when he said that he loved me. He was full of shit. This was about his damn ego. He was attracted to me, and I turned him down. He didn't know how to handle rejection. His ego wasn't my problem. Not anymore. I didn't want to be his stupid girlfriend, and I didn't want anyone to know about us. I wanted to keep my promise to Mia, and I wanted this nightmare to end.

"Milo," I said quietly, "I'm sorry if you thought what we had meant more." I paused to gauge his reaction. I had to be careful. As furious as I was at Milo, he was volatile and unpredictable. I needed to deal with him diplomatically.

"But we have to call it for what it was. We had a fling based on sex. It was misplaced feelings for both of us. Temporary oblivion. That's all. We have to move on."

Milo smirked, shocking the hell out of me. "Are you convincing me or yourself?"

My anger returned with full force. The bit of diplomacy I had left was gone. "Your ego is bruised. That's why you are acting like this."

Milo's expression didn't change—angry, determined, resonating with sexual desire. He grabbed my elbow, fingers flexing until it turned painful.

"Stop acting so innocent, Rave," Milo hissed. "You came on to me just as many times. You reciprocated, too."

This was true. Our physical connection was a crazed magnetic pull that never died down. We took comfort in each other's arms and the escape it provided. Milo might have started our sexual relationship, but whenever my

parents rejected me, I sought him out, too. I was surprised he would throw that in my face. Milo used to be my hero. When did he turn into the villain in my book? He never made me feel bad before.

"I trusted you," I spoke evenly. "I went along with it because I didn't think you'd steer me wrong. We both made a mistake."

"Keep telling yourself that. You love me, but you're scared of what people will think. I can't do it like you can, Rave. I can't sacrifice what I want in fear of other people." Milo scooped me into his arms and took long strides.

"Milo, what are you doing? Let me go!" I shrieked.

He didn't respond. Milo pushed the door open to my room and dropped me on my bed. I tried to jump up, but he lunged at me, effectively pinning me down. When did he become like this? He manipulated tonight to take advantage of me.

"Milo, get off me," I spoke as steadily as I could manage.

His hand moved down my body and slipped inside my shorts easily, fingering me before I could stop him.

"I don't know how else to make this clear to you." I kept calm to reach his rational side. "I don't want to have sex with you."

"Then why are you so wet, Raven," he murmured in my hair. "Your thong is soaked."

Fucking hell. Milo taught me everything about sex. He taught my body to respond to him, and I was always aroused at his will. No wonder he didn't stop.

"Because I'm a teenager," I countered. "Everything gets teenagers horny."

"Stop lying to yourself and stop fighting this."

"Milo, I'm saying no. You are supposed to respect my wishes. You know that, right?"

Milo didn't respond. A climax like never before replaced my protests as he worked me. I grabbed onto his shoulders, shuddering from my orgasm. Milo didn't miss a beat as he pulled down his basketball shorts and slammed inside me.

"Fuck. I love you, baby. I love you so fucking much." Kissing and nipping my lips, he tenderly petted me as he came and slumped on top of me. Kissing my temple, he reminded me of what my body already knew. "You are mine. You'll always be mine."



Milo

I had to stop. I had to dig deep and find the strength. I was ashamed of my behavior and could barely look at myself in the mirror.

If a girl said no, you stop. It was simple. I had never done anything otherwise.

So, why can't I stop with Raven?

This whole week had been a fight. A fight with my sick urges to take what was mine, and a battle with Raven.

Before we started a physical relationship, I denied myself what I wanted most in the world, but I could control it because I had no idea what I was missing out on. I didn't know what it was like to be with her.

Being with her was this potent, mind-boggling, addicting dosage of cocaine. One hit, and I was hooked. Food, money, life, success, friends, family, there was nothing I wouldn't sacrifice. There was nothing I could prioritize in my lust-filled, sick mind that was worth stopping this madness for. Nothing placated me until I was inside her.

No matter how many times I had been with her, I wanted more. This sickening addiction was getting worse every time I was with her. My body had built a tolerance, and I needed more of her to get the same high.

I couldn't go on feeling like this. This insanity, this infinite obsession, this lust; it had to end at some point. It had to slow down, at least. How could it increase by the day? Wasn't sexual tension supposed to decrease once you had sex? When would this craze end?

I reminded myself that I did stop for a few weeks after starting our physical relationship. Even after becoming insane—driven only by lust and my need for that girl—I managed to stop. She told me it was over, and I stayed away for a few weeks. If I could do it once, I could do it again.

I tried. Last night, I stayed with Brandon, but my dark thoughts returned tenfold. Thoughts of her with another man. The idea of her being ripped away from me for good. All those thoughts tore up my insides. The first time she was without me, she left for Paris and found some douchebag. The second time she was without me, I caught her kissing Asher. Those memories returned like a hurricane, and a gnawing voice yelled, she is mine.

I returned home before the night was over.

When Raven broke things off with me, I told myself that I was giving her space. She needed to miss me to remember how much she appreciated me.

This felt different. Though I kept telling her she wanted me, I no longer had the same faith. I couldn't get her to admit she wanted to be with me. Every time she said no, she ripped my heart out. Every time it was ripped out, I became a bigger monster.

Even as I kept telling myself I needed to let her go, I couldn't. She deserved a happy life away from me, but I was too selfish to let her have it because it meant I'd never have a happy life. If I didn't push her, it meant a life without Raven. I couldn't fathom the idea. Despite my shame at my behavior, I couldn't say I regretted my actions.

As I had said, I wasn't a good man.

I can't do this to Raven. Even as I made my daily promise to stay away, I couldn't.

We had a Thanksgiving Party tonight. Raven acted all polite and shit as she does nowadays in front of people but willfully ignored me at all other times. I waited for everyone to clean up and fall asleep, then started toward her room. As I pushed the door open, I found an empty bed, which meant she was staying with Mia again. I shouldn't be surprised. It had been Raven's number one shield against me.

However, Raven underestimated my determination tonight. It had been a few days since we were together. Now, I was more of a madman than before. You couldn't reason with a lunatic. You could only use logic against those who had rational senses left. If she thought she'd get away from me, she had another thing coming.

I confidently strolled into Mia's room to claim what was mine. Raven was sleeping on her side, facing the window. She looked freshly showered and comfortably tucked into bed.

I sat on my haunches to study her. She was beautiful when she slept. Raven stirred when I brushed the hair away from her face and stroked the apple of her cheek with my thumb. Her eyes flew open in confusion. Careful not to wake Mia, I got straight to the point.

"Come to the hallway with me. Otherwise, I'll wake Mia up, and we can talk in front of her," I whispered.

Raven seemed perplexed but followed my directions. Raven knew I wasn't past waking Mia if I dared to enter her room. She slowly rose from the bed, careful not to dip the mattress so Mia didn't feel the sudden shift.

As soon as we were in the hallway, her silence dissipated. "Milo? W-what the hell is going on?"

"Did you think you'd get away from me by staying in Mia's room?" I asked through clenched teeth. Raven stared at me, dazed from her sleepy state. "I'd rather fuck you in my bed, but if you're going to be this difficult, then I'll happily fuck you in this hallway or your bed—hell, even in Mia's bed. Choose an option."

Raven's eyes widened, fully awake from her slumber. "Milo, everyone is here tonight. You can't possibly be doing this right now."

"I don't give two shits about who's here. If you care so much, don't make this worse than it needs to be. Come back to my room."

"No, Milo. Not like this. Not when everyone's here at the house."

Grabbing her by the arms, I shocked her by kissing her. Hard. She pounded my chest as I slipped my tongue inside her mouth. I broke the kiss and yanked at her hair. "In that case, I'll fuck you right here."

I could barely think. I was in a fog—drowning and suffocating in it. Fuck, I wanted her. I wanted her so fucking much that I'd happily fuck her in the hallway. I didn't care if we got caught.

Raven appeared mortified. "Milo, no. Are you insane? We are not having sex while your parents are here."

I was trying hard to control my anger. How could she not want me the same way I wanted her? Did she not feel this magnetic pull we had toward one another? I'd do anything for her, and she continually rejected me.

I hauled her closer, determination plastered in my expression. "We are, and you get to choose where."

Raven struggled but realized she couldn't get out of my hold. Careful to keep her voice low, she put a hand on my chest. "Please, not here. Okay. Okay. You win. Let's go to your room," she said desperately, presumably to get out of this hallway where we could easily get caught.

I was quick to take advantage of the situation. "You won't be difficult? I don't want to fight you every step of the way tonight. If you give me a hard time, I swear I'll bring you back here—"

"I'll be good," Raven conceded.

"And you'll stay the night? You can go back before anyone wakes up. If you don't want to wake up early, we can sleep in your room, and I'll wake up early. Either way, we're sleeping together tonight."

Raven didn't respond. I could see the defiance in her eyes. She didn't want to risk getting caught in the morning.

"I'm serious about this, Raven. You care so much about what other people think. I don't. Disappoint me tonight, and you'll see how less I care about what people think. I'll fuck you in front of my parents if that's what it takes to show you. It's your call."

Raven blinked like she couldn't believe the words coming out of my mouth. She should know by now. I wasn't the man she used to know. "Let's go to your room. I promise I'll stay. I promise I'll do whatever you want," she whispered, probably biting back the curse words she wanted to hurl at me.

I lifted her in my arms before she could change her mind. I carried her to my room—locking the door behind us—then tossed her on my bed, pouncing on her immediately.

Raven had been pulling all the strings of my heart. I'd had no control. I was so fucking angry and needed to take back some of the control. I needed her to know she was mine.

I pulled her close—hands fisting into her hair—slamming my lips against hers. Raven whimpered into my mouth as I pushed her onto the mattress. Growling under my breath, I covered her body with mine, hands resting on either side of her face.

I straightened, only to pull my shirt over my head. My heart beat like a wild drum as I pulled her tank top off and her shorts down. Pulling her panties to the side, I pushed two fingers inside her. I looked her in the eyes as I lowered my face down to her pussy, tongue seeking out her clit.

"Oh, God," Raven moaned, expression wild. Her body strained under me. She choked on a scream when I pressed my tongue against her cunt. I was going to make her come over and over again until she forgot to leave me again.

"Oh, God. Oh, God," she whimpered, careful to keep her voice low.

This wouldn't do. I wanted her to scream. I needed to hear her scream my fucking name. I didn't care who heard us. I wanted everyone to know that she was mine—my parents, my brother, my sister, all of New York City.

I withdrew my fingers and flipped her over to her stomach. With my hands firmly gripping the backs of her knees, I slid both of her thighs forward—ass in the air, face on the pillow. My tongue sought out her sensitive spot again as two of my fingers slipped back inside. Raven bit down on the pillow to muffle the sounds coming from her.

"I want to hear you scream," I hissed. "Scream my fucking name. Say that you're mine; say it loud enough for everyone to hear."

Raven panted, stifling her moans. "Ah—"

Her thighs quaked, and I noted she liked this position. This was the fastest I had seen her ready to fall apart. I pumped my fingers while my tongue grazed her clit.

"Please—" Raven begged, and my chest swelled with pride. She never begged.

"Say you're mine if you want to come." I pumped my fingers quicker and lapped at her clit faster, keeping her on the edge. "Say it."

"Fuck, Milo... I'm yours. Oh, fuck... Oh, God. Please don't stop."

She didn't scream loud enough to carry her voice, but she said my name. Said she was mine. No one else's.

She was mine—my Raven.

I pressed my tongue on her clit, letting her rock to find her release, making the bedsprings creak with my efforts. The death-grip clutch of her cunt kept my fingers locked inside.

"Oh, God," she gasped.

"You are mine," I repeated through clenched teeth. I had only stopped for a millisecond, but Raven looked ready to lose her shit. She pushed her pussy back against my tongue.

"Yes, I'm yours. Please, Milo... don't stop. I'm coming. Keep going."

The moment I gave her that friction, she came on my mouth, moaning incoherently. Raven fell flat on her stomach, limp. I worked my way up, kissing the back of her body as I went. I drew a line up her spine with my tongue.

"You okay?" I murmured when I reached her ear lobe.

She said something incoherent. Raven was brain-dead from her orgasm and could barely form a word. It pulled out a low chuckle from me, my bad mood seeping out. She screamed my name and said she was mine. She gave me what I needed, but deep down, she knew the same truth I did.

She isn't mine.

I am hers.

As Raven steadied her breathing, I lifted off her, realizing I must be crushing her with my weight. Lying back, I grabbed the back of her arm to flip her and pulled her to my chest. Raven's eyes landed on my tented sweatpants, my hard cock straining toward her. Hazel eyes peeked up before lowering.

I stroked my dick through my sweats. "This is what you do to me."

Raven lifted off my chest to move down my body. Making space for herself between my thighs, she pulled at my waistband. I lifted my hips so she could pull my sweatpants down. She kissed my abs and lower abdomen, then grabbed my shaft with her delicate hand. She leaned forward with her mouth open to lick drops of pre-cum around the tip.

"Shit." I mashed my teeth together, already feeling my body vibrating.

She licked the tip of my cock again, finally closing her lips around me. My hips bucked forward, pushing further into her mouth.

I stared at her, awestruck, lust-filled—a man obsessed. Raven wrapped her fingers around me, sucking and pumping. I didn't know how much longer I

could hold back. Brushing her hair back and tugging it restlessly, I raced off to the finish line.

"Baby, I'm going to come." Raven bobbed her head up and down before cupping my balls. That did it for me as I came in her mouth. "Shit. Shit. Oh, God."

I was still floating in euphoria when I blindly reached for her to get her back on my chest and lie in a post-coitus cuddle. I was beyond content. After what seemed like forever, I didn't have to fight her every step of the way. She came as hard as I did.

Why didn't she understand how good we had it?

After some time had passed, Raven shifted. She planned to slip back to Mia's room despite her promise. When Raven stirred again, I flipped her over, bracing one hand on each side of her head.

"I'm not done with you," I growled, nipping at her ear with my teeth.

Maybe I needed to slow down and take a breather. But in my sick mind, I knew I wouldn't be able to blackmail her again once my parents left. This was the first time in so long that she wasn't fighting me. I planned to take full advantage of this situation.

I kissed her, then dipped down to lick the side of her neck. I pushed her legs open, spreading her wide. I looked into her eyes, stopping for a single, heart-pounding second.

"You are so beautiful," I murmured.

I pressed my fingers on her clit, but the opposite side I had stimulated when I went down on her. Her pussy was slick, and I thrust into her hard, not willing to hold back tonight.

Raven initially gave nothing away with her expressions. After a little while, she threw her head back, moaning and rasping.

Soon enough, Raven gave out another earth-shattering orgasm. I didn't wait, pumping into her faster, so we could come simultaneously.

Settling her against me, I grabbed her as hard as I could, not entirely believing she'd stay through the night.

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CHAPTER 9

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DECEMBER 2015



Raven

I WAS GETTING CHANGED INTO MY SLEEPING CLOTHES WHEN I HEARD MY bedroom door fly open with Milo stepping inside. I rolled my eyes. I'd had a grueling day between school and dance practice. The last thing I wanted to do was deal with Milo.

Milo had been on a mission to talk about us. He was manipulating me into sex and didn't stop when I asked him to. There was nothing I could do about it. So, what the hell was there to talk about?

"We have to talk," Milo said predictably.

"We don't," I snapped.

"Unfortunately, you're not the only one who gets to decide. You've been avoiding me."

"And you couldn't take the hint?"

Milo looked at me for a long while. "I hate hurting you," he finally muttered.

Really. Was that all he got? "Well, thank you for that. Now, please leave."

"Why are you being like this?"

"Oh, do I sound annoyed? A few days ago, you threatened to fuck me in front of your parents. I'm sorry. I should be thrilled to speak to you," I said sarcastically.

Milo tried to make eye contact as he spoke. I avoided his gaze, looking anywhere but at him. "Rave, I don't want to keep pushing you, but you refuse to talk about us. I'm losing it here."

"Milo, go find someone else to fuck. All the girls who came over last weekend were dying to sleep with you. Choose one of them and leave me alone. They won't mind your horny episodes or your bipolar mood swings."

Milo flinched. His pained expression tore up my heart. How could he give me puppy dog eyes after threatening to fuck me in front of his parents?

Milo promised never to leave me but walked out when I wouldn't give him what he wanted. He broke my heart, just like my parents. After returning, all he wanted was my body. He didn't care when I said no or asked him to stop.

The veil of deception had been lifted. I didn't idolize this man in front of me anymore. I didn't believe anything coming out of his mouth. All he wanted was sex. His recent behavior was proof of it.

Well, he didn't need me for sex. We had a Thanksgiving party last weekend with many of our family friends. Asher was conveniently left off the guest list. Half the girls here spent the night making moon eyes at Milo. Those girls were prettier than me. They were more experienced and probably better in bed. He could have his pick of the litter and leave me alone.

"Raven," Milo started softly, "you have every reason to hate me. I don't know what I can say to make it better. I can't. I have no excuse for my behavior. I can only tell you that I can't live without you. I love you. I love you so fucking much. I don't know how to make it stop. I feel like the only way it will is if I rip my fucking heart out."

How could Milo keep dropping the L bomb so casually? Well, he could because he was lying. He'd say anything to get me to spread my legs again. I didn't want to hear it; I didn't want to listen to any of this.

"Shut up!" I screeched. "Shut up, shut up. Stop lying through your teeth. You don't love me."

"Of course I do. I've always loved you," Milo merely stated, like it was the most normal thing in the world. As if I should've known.

"In that case, you are doing the most heinous things in the name of love. If you loved me so damn much, how could you do what you did?" I jabbed a finger at his chest.

Milo didn't respond. He focused on me; face covered with sadness. I couldn't stop my traitorous heart from softening. No matter how much I vowed to hate him, this was still Milo. No matter how much they broke me, I could never hate my parents either. I suffered from bouts of unconditional love; I only wished to get it back in return.

I wished my father could love me without conditions, even if I didn't come as a package deal with my mom. I wished Mom could love me, even if I couldn't fulfill her need for a glamorous life. I wished Milo could love me, even if I couldn't give him what he wanted physically.

Milo finally spoke. "You are right. You should tell everyone what I did. I deserve whatever punishment I get."

My heart squeezed so hard that I couldn't breathe. "I can't do that," I whispered.

"Why not?"

"You know why."

"Because you love me?"

Jesus. Give him an inch, and he takes a yard. "No, I don't," I said firmly.

"Stop lying, Raven. Why can't you just admit it?"

"Milo, you were my first. You taught me everything I know and like about sex. I might be unable to control reacting positively to you, but I can control everything else. You can force my body, maybe manipulate it to respond to you, but you'll never have anything else of mine. You'll never have my heart."

Milo glared at me. I could see the caring Milo leaving the vicinity, replaced by the lust-crazed sociopath I didn't want to be around.

"That's not true. I know you feel the way I do. I can feel you in my bones, in my blood. If you feel otherwise, then here." Milo grabbed my hand and placed his phone in it. "Call your parents. Call my parents. Call Reid. Hell, call the police. I won't stop you. Tell everyone what I did. I'll take whatever the consequences are for my actions. I'm still man enough to own up to that much. Do it, Rave."

I blinked.

Milo had gone off the deep end. If he went to jail, it would leave all three of us wholly abandoned. I would lie through my teeth, take a bullet, or get run over by a bulldozer before putting Reid or Mia in that position.

"I'm not going to do that."

"If you're not going to tell them, then be with me."

"Never."

Milo looked around desperately, searching for an answer. "Rave, you're so out of touch with your emotions that you don't understand your own feelings. You love me, but it's like you can't access that part of yourself. Why are you doing this to yourself? Why are you doing this to me?" He looked at the end of his rope, which wasn't good news for me.

I refused to be here when Milo went off. I shook my head. He was wrong, but I didn't care to prove it. He could have the final word as I was done with this conversation.

I spun in place, ready to exit my room. Milo grabbed my elbow, effectively ending my escape plan. My reflexes kicked in, and I turned to slap him

across his face. "Do not fucking touch me!"

Milo didn't flinch. He reciprocated by grabbing my arms and pulling me to his chest. "You are such a confused little girl," he yelled as he shook me. "You don't know what you want. You need me to tell you what you want, like always."

Refusing to back down, I yelled, "Really! Am I confused? You promised my dad to take care of me. Instead, you're fucking me. You're supposed to be my guardian." I hoped the last portion would shame him into snapping out of it.

No such luck.

"It's simple, Rave. We belong together. Stop fighting this." Milo pulled me closer.

I pushed back, dropping his phone in the process on the soft carpet. "Stop it, Milo."

Milo seemed out of his mind, deaf to my words. Like he was talking to himself, having a personal monologue. I only happened to be here. "You said you love me. You said it yourself."

"I don't love you. Now get off me," I stated firmly.

He grabbed my wrists hard enough to leave marks. I bent and twisted to struggle out of his hold. "Milo, stop," I said more forcefully.

He let go of one wrist to grab the buttons of my shirt, yanking it open. The buttons ripped and scattered across the floor.

"What are you doing?" I bellowed as I struck him with my free hand.

He seemed utterly oblivious to my attacks and grabbed onto my shorts. This was a Milo I had never met. He had blacked out, possessed. I tried to push him off but lost my balance and fell backward on my ass. Milo wasted no time. He was on top of me with rapid speed, trapping me.

"Please, baby. Please don't fight me. I love you so fucking much. You're all I ever wanted." He kissed my face as I tried to kick him. Milo grabbed my

leg, holding it down. I was on my back, stretched out under him. Grabbing my wrists, he pinned them on each side of my face. It was a painfully hard grip.

"Ow. Ow. Milo! You're hurting me," I cried out.

He didn't respond, nor did he slow down as he yanked my shorts down.

"Stop! Please, Milo, I'm begging you. Don't do this. It's me, Raven. How can you hurt me like this?"

"Yes, my Raven," Milo breathed into my ear.

"Yes, yours. Remember? Your Raven. Please don't do this to me." I was grasping at straws. I didn't know what else would snap him out of this.

There were other times when Milo didn't listen to me when I asked him to stop, but never like this. All those times, I was never scared of Milo. This time I was paralyzed with fear. If there was a time to stop, this would be it.

Milo didn't seem remotely coherent or conscious. I had never fought him this much and didn't know how to reach him. This wasn't my Milo, my hero. Couldn't he see I was begging him, that I was in pain?

"I can't live without you, baby. You're in my system, imprinted on my soul. Just love me. That's all I want. I'll make you so happy, I promise."

"Stop!" I shrieked. I screamed, though no one was home. I kicked him again but failed to land a solid strike. In turn, Milo grabbed under my right knee and pushed it up forcefully.

"We are always at peace when we're connected. You know it, too. I can make you feel it again. I know you'll remember once I'm inside you. You always do."

He pushed two fingers inside me as he bit my neck and breasts. I sobbed and cried while Milo kissed away my tears, telling me how much he loved me.

Finally, it sunk in. He was going through with it. I genuinely didn't want him, but he was doing it anyway.

The point of no return, and I... this wasn't real.

Milo yanked down his sweatpants. One of his large hands had both my wrists locked on top of my head. He used the other to rub my clit and found a spot that made me wet enough to take him. He was unmovable. I didn't try to use the rest of my limbs since I couldn't escape his massive frame, so I did the next best thing.

I turned my head to the side and told myself this wasn't happening. I had to distance my mind from what was happening to my body. If there was a time for my compartmentalization skills to come in handy, it was at this moment.

Not even allowing me the tiny spectrum of denial, Milo nudged my face with his hand, forcing me to face him. He kissed me and bit my bottom lip when I didn't open my mouth. I didn't care if he split my lip; I refused. Milo didn't clamp down any harder but shoved his tongue inside me anyways. He explored my mouth hungrily and moaned. His fingers found the right spot on my clit, and I struggled against an oncoming orgasm. Trying to ignore the caresses, I attempted to escape inside my mind. Milo hated it when I did this. It was his biggest pet peeve when he couldn't get a reaction from me.

Good. I hoped it pissed him off.

However, Milo was having none of that today. He grabbed my chin and kissed me like a maniac. I was distracted and caught off guard when he slammed his cock into me. I slid upward due to his sheer force to drive into me, and he brought me back to place.

I didn't move, playing dead as he thrust into me. That's why the orgasm took me by surprise when his fingers slipped between us to rub the right spot. Despite myself, I came at the same time he did.

He slumped over me while I lay perfectly still underneath. I couldn't believe that just happened. I never thought something like this could happen with Milo, of all people.

He turned his face to kiss my cheek. "I love you."

"You are a sick cocksucker."

"Language, Rave," Milo chided. I turned to stare at him in disbelief. Was he disciplining me while still inside me?

I didn't say more as Milo pulled out and went to the bathroom. A few minutes later, a warm washcloth cleaned the last of him off me. Two large hands picked me up and carried me to the bed.

Milo pulled the comforter over, slid underneath it, and held me to him. He was asleep within minutes. I tried to wiggle out of his hold, but it was of no avail. Even in sleep, Milo's grip had grown iron-strong since he figured out I didn't want to sleep in the same bed as him.

My eyes drifted shut while I plotted how to get out of this situation. A lightbulb went off, and I vowed this to be the final time he touched me.

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CHAPTER 10

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MARCH 13TH, 2020



Raven

IT WASN'T SUPPOSED TO HAPPEN AGAIN. I PROMISED MYSELF THAT THE LAST time he touched me would be the last time he touched me. For years, I had been able to keep that promise. One afternoon shattered everything I had built.

I stared at Milo's locked bedroom door while he spooned me from behind. He whispered annoying shit in my ear, things he thought were sweet or dirty talk. I tuned him out, keeping my focus on how to escape this situation. I already moved out of my place and didn't have a friend in the city to provide me with shelter.

"Raven, you can't leave this house," Milo said, presuming I was planning my escape. He waved a hand in front of my eyes, blocking my view of the door.

"Shut up."

"Great comeback. I expected something more original."

"Go choke on a dick. How's that for originality?"

"Heard it way too many times. It was Reid's favorite line against me when he was a teenager."

"So, it's a classic," I retorted.

I tried to get up, but Milo's arms tightened around me instinctively.

"Can you please let go? I'd like to change and shower before the entire family gets here."

"I'm not ready to let go. I missed this way too much. They won't be here for a while if you want to—"

"Ew. No, thank you. You got what you wanted. Now, please get off me."

"Ew? I don't think that's what you were saying—"

"Yeah, yeah. You can get me off by looking at me. Great, you made me orgasm and passed it off as consent. Good for you. I've heard this shit before. I want to go shower and get your smell off me." This time I did manage to rip out of his hold.

Milo quirked an eyebrow. His amused expression made me want to murder him.

I searched for my clothes, aware from my peripheral vision that Milo was eyeing my naked body like it was his last supper. I wrapped a bedsheet around me in a bath towel fashion. I had barely found my shoes when Milo rose from the bed and pulled on his boxers. He'd pounce on me again if I weren't out of here soon. I could feel it.

Fuck it. I'd rather sprint to my room in this bedsheet. There was no one else around.

Leaving my clothes behind, I purposefully marched toward the bedroom door with my shoes in hand. I unlocked it, swung the door open with force... and immediately wished I hadn't.

The walls closed in on me as I gripped the door with one hand and bunched the bed sheet with the other. This was a nightmare. Any second, I'd wake up to realize I was anywhere but here.

My world spun. Life would never be as it was.

Milo joined me at the door and put an arm around me, further solidifying the truth of this nightmare. Standing in front of me were my parents, Milo's parents, Mia, and... Reid.



October 2015

"Come on, Rave. Do you really not know?"

I dumbfoundedly stared at Mia as she further shattered my world with her next bit of information. As if there weren't enough reasons, her news hammered the nail into the coffin over why I should have never started anything with Milo, nor could it happen again.

"Reid's been in love with you since the day you guys were born."

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DESOLATE

DRETHI ANIS

BOOK 1.5 OF THE QUARANTINE SERIES

* Desolate is a complimentary novella based on popular requests. It's an alternate point of view for Book 1: Quarantined.

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CHAPTER I

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JULY 2013



Reid

ASHER FUCKING HUNTZBURGER. AGAIN.

This summer sucked. I spent it watching Raven and Asher make googly eyes at one another during these stupid parties. I wanted to punch the fucker in the face. Rip his limbs out of his stupid body and rearrange them. Give him hands for legs and legs for hands. I'd like to see him make a move on her, then.

She wanted him again. I could tell by how they were eye fucking each other from across the room. If she snuck away with him again... I couldn't stand here and do nothing.

I can tell on her. I shouldn't, but I could tell Milo that Raven was sneaking around to make out with Asher. Raven was fifteen, and Asher was at least eighteen. Milo would have a field day with that. He would kick Asher's sorry little butt. Asher would never be invited to Milo's parties again; if I never had to see Asher's face, that was perfectly fine.

Hell, I could beat him up myself. This was exactly why I wanted to work out with Milo. So I could Kick. Asher's. Ass.

Unfortunately, I couldn't do any of those things. I couldn't beat up Asher without risking Raven asking some serious questions about our relationship, or lack thereof.

I couldn't tell on her either. She'd hate me if she found out I tarnished her name in front of her precious Milo. Lord forbid if someone were to ruin her perfect track record in front of him.

Leave it to Raven to be obsessed with every male in the world except me. It was one thing to hate Asher fucking Huntzburger, but hating my own brother was low. Well, hate might be a strong word, but since Raven moved to New York, I strongly disliked Milo.

I, of all people, should know what she wanted, but part of knowing Raven was understanding she was impossible to read romantically.

At least I had another target tonight other than my goddamn brother. Fucking Asher Huntzburger. I could go back to wanting him dead.

I tried fucking with his head. I told Asher that Raven was fifteen and had no experience with men. The asshole didn't care. None of these fuckers cared. Men were always fascinated with Raven because she was abnormal. Yes, a weird reason to find a girl attractive, but it was true.

Raven wasn't boy-crazy. They couldn't get a read on her or figure her out. That's why they were attracted to her—she was mysterious.

Men fawned over Raven. Hell, I fawned over Raven, and she fawned over Milo.

And now Asher fucking Huntzburger.

God. I hated that stupid asshole and his stupid, pretentious asshole name. Why the hell were we friends with him? I knew he wanted her. I could see it in his greedy, little beady eyes. When Milo first let us attend these parties, I found Asher laser-focused on Raven.

I couldn't compete with Asher or Milo. They were older, authoritative figures, and if anyone had a daddy complex, it was Raven.

I dropped hints to show her what she meant to me, but Raven would never acknowledge it unless she was ready to see romance. Many people lacked emotional intelligence; Raven lacked romantic intelligence. She had no clue of the effect she had on men. The only semi-romantic interest she had displayed was for Milo, and even that was confusing. Half the time, I couldn't pinpoint if it was sisterly affection or a romantic crush.

It wasn't Milo's fault Raven followed him around like his lost puppy, but I didn't know where else to direct this anger and jealousy. I couldn't direct it toward Raven. Never.

At least Milo had no interest in Raven. She could want him with all her might; Milo would never see her as anything more than his little sister, like Mia.

Maybe that's why she wanted him so badly. Milo didn't pay her attention and strutted around with other women. I should do the same so she'd want me, too.

It wasn't Milo or Asher's fault. This was my doing. I was the one who pushed Milo to let us come to these parties. Raven and I weren't allowed to do most things without Milo's supervision, and I wanted to show her a good time. I was the one who told Raven that we needed to make a pact. We should try our first kisses together by the end of freshman year.

I meant with each other.

Instead, she asked me who I wanted to kiss and twisted the knife when she informed me of her plans to kiss Asher. Leave it to Raven to dismiss or misinterpret every single thing I said. Why was it so hard for her to see me in that light?

I held off kissing anyone else because of her and kept waiting for her to be ready. Little did I understand what she had in mind.

I'd had to watch her make moves on Ash all summer. After the first time I saw them together, I got shit-faced, hooked up with some girl, and passed out on the street. It was a bad night. Since then, it had been a rotating door. Every time we had one of these parties, I had to see her with Asher. Every

time I did, I drowned in alcohol and hooked up with the closest warm body. I went a little further with one of those girls each time, hoping to spark Raven's jealousy somehow. Hoping somehow it'd make everything better.

It didn't.

Last month, I got my first blow job.

It happened right after I saw Raven's mouth plastered to Asher's. I wanted to go over and rip him into pieces. One of my groupies—as Raven called them—intervened, looking for attention.

So, instead of having my fist make contact with Asher's stupid face, I went upstairs to get a blow job. She was older and had no problem going further. I just couldn't.

I held out on having sex, hoping Raven would come around.

Instead, I stood like an idiot with our friends, watching them stare at each other. She wasn't done with him. Obviously, he wasn't done with her, either. Asher looked smitten with Raven and gave her the signal to meet him outside.

As predicted, Asher walked out, with Raven following closely after, presumably to go to their meet-up spot and make out some more.

Rage burnt through me at such an accelerated speed that my legs moved faster than my mind. Slamming my drink down, I broke away from the group and scattered to the door.

"Reid, where are you going?" Some drunk girl came over to hang around my neck. What was her name? Andrea or Amy. Something with an A.

"Just going out for air." I pulled her off of me.

"I'll come with you."

"No."

Stumbling outside of the house, I searched the empty streets. They disappeared into thin air, but I couldn't sit around and do nothing. Not

again.

Raven didn't pick up when I called her phone, so I texted her instead.

Hey, where did you run off to?

No response. I was going out of my mind, acting like a crazy motherfucker, but she couldn't be with him. This had to stop.

There was a trail and a park nearby. Those were the only two places they could have gone for privacy at this time of the night. I checked the trail first. Nothing. Next, I walked to the nearby park and located two lone figures sitting on the swing set. Raven and Asher.

Thank God they weren't kissing, so I didn't have to kill Asher. They were merely talking. Walking toward them casually, I did my best to suppress my rage.

"Hey, guys."

Raven and Asher whipped their heads in apparent shock.

"Umm... hey, Stud." Raven plastered on a confused smile, trying to read me with her questioning eyes and asking why the hell I was clit-blocking her.

"Hey man, what's going on?" Asher eyed me apprehensively as well.

What's going on is you are sitting here with a fifteen-year-old girl, you fucking pedophile. Get away from her and never look at her again with your beady eyes.

Biting my tongue, I did my best to keep my cool. Milo recently enrolled me in therapy to work on my anger issues. As always, Milo went into Mr. Fix-it mode. He wanted to fix everything and everyone, including me. He was such a fucker. I was going to beat him up, too, just like Asher.

Okay, perhaps my anger was out of control, which wasn't productive at the moment.

"Raven's been missing from the party for a while," I said evenly.

“Oh... umm,” Raven started with her usual stammering, which meant she was baffled.

“We’ll be right there,” Asher solidified her plans on her behalf.

My fists clenched on their own. There was no we. There was only Raven and me. That’s the only time there was a ‘we,’ but I couldn’t say that either.

There was only one surefire way to get Raven’s attention. “Milo was asking about her. I didn’t want him coming out and looking for Raven.” I tilted my head pointedly toward Asher.

“Shit.” Raven jumped before Asher could form another word in his thick skull. Fucking predictable.

“Rave, it’s not that big of a deal—” Asher started.

“Yes, it is,” Raven and I both said in unison.

“Ash, I’ll text you later. I gotta go.” Raven hurried toward the path leading to the house.

“Raven!” Asher called out as he jumped to his feet to follow her.

“Listen, man,” I blocked his path, keeping his horny dick away from her. “You might not care about Milo finding out, but I know Raven does. Milo is already freaking out. If you go after her right now, it’ll stress her out more.”

“I’m going to walk her home, at least. It’s close to midni—”

“I’ll walk her home,” I cut him off. “Milo won’t be angry if he thinks we went for a walk, but if he finds out you were with her at this hour, it’ll be bad for Raven. Trust me.”

I could see his hesitation, deciding between the chivalry of walking Raven home or risking getting caught. He knew—as well as I did—that every man was a consolation prize in Raven’s eyes, second best only to Milo. If Milo got wind of it, Raven would dump Asher’s sorry ass in a heartbeat.

Asher thought with his dick instead of his moral code. “Okay, fine. You walk her home.” He cocked his head at Raven’s quickly descending figure.

“Rave, text me when you get home. Stay with Reid.”

“Will do.” Raven didn’t bother turning around to acknowledge him.

I quickened my pace to catch up to Raven. Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw Asher’s retreating figure in the opposite direction.

“Is Milo pissed?” Raven said as I fell into step next to her.

“Huh?”

“Milo! You said he was looking for me. Is he pissed?”

I already forgot about the white lie. Milo did ask about Raven, but earlier in the night. Not when I left to find her.

“Oh, right. He is fine. We couldn’t find you at the party, and you didn’t answer my calls. I guess you were having too much fun.” I failed to keep the disdain out of my voice.

“Oh, sorry. I totally spaced.”

We were both quiet for a few minutes. Grabbing her hand, I entwined it with mine as we made our way back. “Rave, I don’t care for Asher,” I broke the silence lingering between us.

“What?”

“I. Don’t. Care. For. Asher.” I enunciated each word as if it would mean more if I did.

“Why?”

“Because he is eighteen, pursuing a fifteen-year-old.” There were plenty of women who were his age. Why didn’t he pursue one of them?

“He doesn’t know I am fifteen,” Raven protested. “Everyone assumed I was seventeen, and I didn’t correct them.”

Asher did know she was fifteen, which made him a creep, but I didn’t bother disclosing it to Raven. It would end in a massive fight if she found

out I told him. It might make Asher look bad, but not enough to win me points.

“Still. Before we started attending these parties, Milo told the guys they were never allowed to pursue you or Mia. Asher knows Milo will kill him if you two are caught and is putting you in a bad position as well. Milo will be pissed at you, too.”

“I know,” Raven sighed in defeat. “But you were the one who kept saying we needed to experience our firsts together. I wasn’t going to leave you hanging on our deal. All the boys in our class are so lame. Where the hell was I supposed to meet someone interesting if not through one of Milo’s parties?”

I. Hated. My. Life.

I did this; I shot myself in the foot. “Rave, it was stupid to think we needed to experience our first kisses by the end of freshman year. Just forget about it. Asher is not good enough for you. He should have never been your first kiss.”

“Ugh. You don’t think anyone is good enough for me.”

“Damn right.” It’s true. No one was good enough or deserving of her, and there were so many of them. My stomach was tied in knots as I thought of the men I had to compete with. One day at a time. One asshole at a time. In the meanwhile, I could remind her of the risk with Asher until it got through to her, and she moved on.

Right on cue, Raven spoke without provocation. “Ash is sweet. I like him but not enough to pick a fight with Milo,” Raven concluded.

“I think that’s a mature decision. He isn’t worth it.”

“Har har.”

We walked to the house in a comfortable silence as I contemplated how to get all of them out of her system until she only saw me, the same way I only saw her.

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CHAPTER 2

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AUGUST 2015



Reid

RAVEN AND I HAD BEEN IN PARIS FOR MOST OF THE SUMMER. RAVEN arrived in May to help Theresa set up her shop, and I joined her in mid-summer. I was excited to be in Europe with her, just us two, without New York City distractions.

No Milo. No one from our infamous parties, and no way for her to meet older men through Milo's friend group. I thought everything would change for the better.

Raven and I finally discussed her obsession with Milo at our seventeenth birthday party, and it clicked. Raven wasn't in love with Milo. It was merely her usual obsession with pleasing parental figures. She was such a teacher's pet.

After I explained how her behavior appeared to others, Raven had no problem distancing herself from Milo. She had barely contacted him this summer. I should feel guilty for sabotaging their relationship, but I didn't. Raven wasn't distracted by Milo anymore, and I had her all to myself again.

I wanted to beef up before seeing Raven again. Plus, Milo seemed frustrated over the summer with his new business. Before coming to Paris,

we went on a stricter gym regimen than before. We bulked up significantly. Milo and I had always fared well with the female demographic, but by the time I left for Paris, every chick in our vicinity threw themselves at us.

Yet, I refrained.

In the past, I'd had my share of sexual experiences, but I never went all the way. Milo and Raven thought I was actively having sex, but I kept holding out. Kept waiting pathetically for her. It was such a pussy thing to do, especially for a horny teenager.

In the back of my miserably hopeful mind, I hoped Raven would wake up and see me. If there was one thing I wanted to share with Raven, it was our first time.

After my conversation with Raven at the birthday party and after receiving the all-clear she wasn't into Milo, I thought about telling her how I felt over the summer. We were going to spend the summer in Paris. I thought this summer we could finally... ugh.

I ignored all the other girls until coming to Paris, only to find her with a boyfriend.

Are you fucking kidding me!?

Raven was dating some asshole named Michelle. What kind of name was that, anyway?

At least I never had to see her actively date someone before. Not like this. She added the douchebag as her plus-one to our plans and called him her fucking boyfriend. I wanted to choke the living shit out of him more than I wanted to with Asher or Milo. That's what I had to do. I had to kill off the entire male population before Raven noticed me.

Even then, she might say some stupid shit like, you are my brother from another mother.

God, I hated those words. I cringed and shut down every time she said them to me.

When would this torture end? Why did God make me love such a crazy woman?

Not only was she dating Michelle in front of me, but they were getting physical. Raven didn't share details as she was notoriously private about some things, even with me. I knew she was going further with him than any guy before. I kept hoping, for my sanity, it wasn't the case.

It was getting harder to live in denial.

We went to a club not long ago, and she left with Michelle, texting me to say she was leaving. Before I could run out of the club to stop her, they were gone. I kept calling her, but her phone was turned off.

She didn't come home until the following day.

This was so much worse than when I thought she liked Milo. Now I wished she was interested in Milo instead. At least she never had a shot with Milo. Now she was fucking this Michelle and asking me all kinds of sex questions. We sometimes watched porn as a joke, but recently I could tell she was taking mental notes. She was trying to gain experience and ideas to try with him.

I couldn't take it anymore.

I had also started fucking. I no longer gave two shits about this romantic crap and waiting for her. I couldn't remember the name of the first girl I slept with. I went from zero to way too many within a couple of months. You would think something like that would make a seventeen-year-old feel better.

It didn't, which was why I had to talk to her.

I fidgeted in front of her door, contemplating whether I should knock or casually walk in like I always did. I decided on the latter.

I swung the door open and found Raven stretched out on her stomach on the bed, flipping through a magazine. God, she was so beautiful. Did she know how beautiful she was?

What was I going to say? Right.

“I don’t like him,” I declared. Not exactly how I intended to start the conversation but there—it was out and in the open.

“You don’t like whom?” Raven burrowed her eyebrows.

Damnit. I needed to practice my spiel.

“Michelle.”

“It’s Michel.”

“I don’t like him.”

“He is sweet.”

“And you have a sweet tooth though we both know it’s bad for you.”

Raven stared at me for a moment, then burst out laughing. I didn’t join in, wanting to establish I was serious.

“You are serious. What’s your problem with Michel anyways?”

“He is too old for you,” I said with my arms crossed.

“He is only four years older than me.”

“That’s too old.”

“Stop. You and Milo never think any boy is good enough for me.”

Raven sat on the bed, crossing her legs. I joined her on the bed and mimicked her position. I sat across from her so she could see the sincerity in my eyes.

“Because they are not. Do you actually like him?” I held my breath as I awaited her response.

“He is cool. I enjoy his company.”

“He is a total creep for chasing someone so much younger than him. Not to mention, we are returning to New York soon. It makes no sense to let him

get attached to you.”

“You think?”

“Yes,” I asserted. “He is all over you. It’s best if you end it now before it gets messier.”

“Hmm... good point, as always. I’ll think about it.”

“What is there to think about?” I didn’t get it. All I was asking was for her to break up with this douchebag. Why wouldn’t Raven be reasonable?

“Well, I might return to Paris. It’d be nice to have a ready-made boyfriend in that case.”

“What?” I couldn’t keep the hurt out of my voice. “You are moving to Paris. Since when?” She was going to leave me? She didn’t so much as discuss it.

“Well, the Paris School of Fashion has a great program, and Mom is finally settled in one city instead of traveling all the time. If I do my undergraduate in Paris, I’ll get to live in the fashion capital of the world. They do non-credit semester internships. I’m almost done at Wellington with my core classes. So, I can do a remote internship for my last semester to see if I like it here. Call it a test trial.” She must have noticed the disdain on my face because she quickly added, “It’s just an idea. An additional option.”

“And FIT?” I could barely keep my voice steady.

“Another great option.”

I couldn’t form words, so I remained quiet. Raven and I always talked about her attending the Fashion Institute of Technology while I attended New York University and possibly getting an apartment together. After my undergraduate, I wanted to work for Wall Street, and she wanted to be in fashion. New York was an excellent option for Raven’s career, but Paris wasn’t a great option for me.

“Okay, I’ll apply with you,” I spoke without thinking.

“To Paris School of Fashion?”

I rolled my eyes. “No, stupid. I’ll find a school in Paris for Econ or Finance and apply there. What the hell does it matter if we go to school in New York or Paris?”

“Why would you do that?”

“Where else would I be if not with you?”

Before I could say more, Raven jumped in my arms. I laughed as I almost tipped backward in my attempt to catch her. A little too soon, Raven pulled back.

After a few minutes, Raven asked, “You’d do that for me?”

Should I tell her now?

For years, I watched her swoon over Milo. It ripped my insides. I hooked up with chick after chick, hoping for some sort of reaction or jealousy. Nothing. I came to Paris for her, only to find out she had a boyfriend. I was so choked up I could barely speak when she sprung him on me. I went through woman after woman. This time I wasn’t trying to make her jealous; I sought comfort and distraction.

I was done with those mind-fuck games. I was nothing without her. Half of me was always missing when we weren’t together. I couldn’t be in New York if Raven weren’t there.

“Everyone tells us we have an unhealthy codependency on each other. Might as well prove them right,” I said, mentally gearing myself for the upcoming heavy conversation.

“Then let’s stay in New York,” Raven proclaimed.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“I thought you were sold on the idea of moving to the fashion capital of the world.” I raised an eyebrow at Raven.

“I wasn’t sold. It was an idea, but as I think about it, it was a bad idea. I can be a successful designer in either New York or Paris. You can’t successfully run Wall Street if you aren’t physically near Wall Street, and us living on two different continents will never work. I can’t function without you.”

This was it. It was now or never. Before I could open my mouth, Raven sighed dramatically.

“What can I say? You are my,” —don’t say it, Raven— “brother from another mother.”

MOTHERFUCKER!

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CHAPTER 3

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NOVEMBER 2015



Reid

THE PARTY HAD ONLY BEGUN, AND I WAS ALREADY EXHAUSTED.

Milo always threw Raven and me lavish parties for our birthdays. So, we decided to return the favor and throw Milo a grand twenty-first birthday party.

Raven had outdone herself with the decorations, and Asher had overdone it with cases and beer and liquor. I had been running around all day, tying up loose ends and helping the vendors unload in the house. We had a caterer, servers, and various party activities Milo liked. Raven and I had saved for months to throw him this party.

We began the night with a family dinner at a restaurant. Afterward, the parents went off to stay at the Plaza and took Mia with them so we could have the house.

Now that our last task was done, which was to bring Milo here for the big reveal, Raven and I were focused on drinking and hanging out with our friends. We invited our small clique of friends to keep ourselves entertained.

Milo had way too many friends. The house was packed, so we decided to let most of his friends party inside the house while the ‘youngins’ gathered outside by the back patio, enjoying the cool November weather. A few people were also on the street across from the house, enjoying a cigarette or two. I didn’t smoke anymore, but I walked toward the guys huddled in a circle.

“You got a lighter?” Sam asked as soon as I joined them. We attended the same school, and he was one of my core boys.

“Nah. I gave up smoking,” I replied.

“Since when?” Jon, Sam’s older brother, piped in. He frowned at me suspiciously.

“Since I realized it’ll kill me, and I enjoy being alive.” And since Raven continually threw away every single pack I bought. She finally threatened not to speak to me if I didn’t quit.

“All right, your highness, no need to be so prissy.” Asher threw both hands in the air and mimicked me.

I rolled my eyes, grinning nonetheless.

Asher Huntzburger, always the comic. I hated Asher’s guts not too long ago for holding Raven’s attention. I sometimes shook my head, thinking of how much I used to loathe him. After all, it wasn’t his fault. What man could resist it when Raven Beckett threw you a bone?

Once I realized Raven was over Asher and he could do nothing to change her mind, my anger turned into pity. It was pathetic watching him vie for her attention. Guess I saw something of myself in him. Over the years, commiseration turned into a camaraderie of sorts. Now, I kind of liked Asher. He was a good guy but under the Raven spell. If anyone could empathize, it was me.

I turned my head slightly to stare at Raven by the patio door. She was talking to Natalie and looking unbelievably gorgeous, as usual.

Asher followed my gaze, his eyes landing on her as well. Neither of us spoke as we stared at her. Her long, dark hair flew everywhere. Her dress showed just the right amount of skin, and the heels propped her ass up. Honestly, it was torture for any man to watch her.

Other men wanted her because they couldn't have her. Men were truly like dogs. If a woman ignored a man, he pursued her more. The chase was the allure. We wanted what we couldn't have.

There were other beautiful women in the world, but they couldn't keep a man's attention when they acted desperately. It wasn't about looks. Instead, it was about how you carried yourself. I learned these things from years of observation and concluded that was the reason so many men wanted Raven.

However, it wasn't why I wanted Raven.

I wanted her because we had a bond unparalleled by anything else in this world. We shared every memory, good and bad. Since we learned to speak, not a single day had gone by when we didn't talk to one another. I wanted her because she was the only girl who could make my heart beat a million times within the same second.

Most of all, I wanted Raven because there was something so special about the way she loved. Once you earned her love, it was no holds barred. She'd do anything for those she loved.

If I got sick, Raven never left my side. When I gave up smoking, Raven was glued to me to ensure I didn't fall off the wagon. When her dad opened a debit card for Raven, she automatically put my name on the account because I didn't have one.

The small things she did for the people she loved were why I wanted her. That wasn't why Asher wanted her. He wanted her because he couldn't have her.

"Hey, I'll be right back," Asher said.

"Sure," I nodded.

He was going over to hit on Raven, which used to bother me. I used to want him dead every time he looked at Raven.

Not anymore.

I'd be angry if it weren't so pathetic to watch. It was too sad, like the Titanic going down.

I wanted to tell him to move on, but I had no leg to stand on. If anyone needed a lesson on how to move on from Raven Beckett, it was me. It had only been, what, seventeen years? I hadn't moved on, not a smidge. If there were a switch to turn it off, I would have used it by now.

As much as I loved Raven, I stopped pursuing her since Paris. Raven was finally interested in dating, but she chose someone else to date. After she broke things off with Michelle, I thought we could talk. Instead, she left my ass in Paris via text and abruptly flew to New York.

I could be in love with her until my dying breath, and it would change nothing. We needed distance, and I'd created some since our return from Paris. For example, I didn't go to her room or hang out with her all the time. I went out with my boys, while Raven often stayed home. I was unsure if she noticed. There was no point in pursuing her. Raven wanted someone older. Since I was born an hour before her, it was one thing I could never change.

She'd always be my best friend, and that's it. I should be grateful she hadn't dated since our return.

As for myself, I had been swimming in women and drinking copious amounts of alcohol. It helped. Somewhat.

Like tonight. I had been talking to the chick who was strutting toward us. She was older, experienced, in college, and perfect to bury myself in for the night.

What did she say her name was? Juli, July, or Jules? I racked my brain as Juli/July/Jules joined me. "Should we go back to my dorm?"

“Yup. Let me just shoot my brother a text.” I pulled out my phone to text Milo I was leaving.

“Okay. I am going to grab my purse and say bye to my friend. Give me like ten minutes.”

“Sounds good.” I gave her the Sinclair megawatt smile.

See? Moving on instead of crying over the girl who’d never love me back, unlike Asher over there.

I glanced over at Asher and Raven. It was hard to watch him grovel at her feet, and I was glad for not pathetically chasing after her anymore. Paris had given me a much-needed slap in the face.

Asher lunged at Raven just as the thought crossed my mind, grabbing her for a lip lock.

What the fuckity fuck?

All the pity for Asher was gone, not after he put his grimy hands on Raven.

I was across the street from the house. I was about to rush over, ready to tear Asher from limb to limb when Milo’s unmistakable figure tackled Asher to the ground. Milo appeared insane, landing punch after punch.

Holy shit. Milo might kill the motherfucker.

I broke into a run, but Raven had already thrown herself at Milo, hugging him from the front and screaming. Milo grabbed Raven by the elbow and dragged her inside before I made it back. My first instinct was to check on Raven, but it looked like Milo got her. Instead, I went to Asher. I wanted to kill him, but Milo might have beat me to the cause.

Fuck. Asher looked terrible, and there was blood everywhere. I thought I was the hot-tempered one, but Milo had lost his mind. My brother might go to jail tonight. I had to take charge and clean up his mess.

I directed Sam and Jon to help me carry Asher. Our friends, Dennie and Ulysses, grabbed the first aid kit and towels. Janeen went inside to find Amy, one of our family friends. She was a nurse and, luckily, still coherent.

Amy put on her nurse's hat and cleaned Asher's wounds before applying butterfly stitches. Our friends frantically ran around, helping however they could. There was also a crowd forming around them.

This was bad. We had a lot of family friends here, and they might blab to their parents, who were friends with our parents. That was the last thing we needed.

"Hey, guys. I need everyone to go inside," I announced. "We had a small accident, but everything is fine now. Amy is on it, so go inside and enjoy the party."

People cleared out and returned to the party. We didn't need more witnesses to Milo's crazy outburst. I prayed Asher didn't have to go to the hospital. A hospital visit would mean an incident report and charges against Milo. What the hell overcame him, anyways? He had always been even-tempered. Yes, I wanted to kill Asher, too, but for a different reason than out of brotherly love for Raven. What Milo did was past protective brotherly instincts. It verged on jealous boyfriend territory. Those were my initial instincts but watching Asher's sorry ass on the ground reminded me of why I pitied him.

I froze.

What Milo did was absolutely in the jealous boyfriend territory.

There was no way... it couldn't be true. I was wrong in my assessment; I had to be.

I couldn't sit around with these thoughts churning in my mind. After speaking with Amy, I confirmed Asher didn't need to go to the hospital. He wouldn't press charges against Milo otherwise because Asher knew he fucked up. I excused myself, my mind reeling from the insane conclusion. I kept repeating in my head that I was delusional and reading too much into it.

Where the hell did Milo and Raven run off to anyway?

I searched the party, room by room. There was no sign of Milo or Raven. Finally, I made my way upstairs to check Raven's room. Nothing. Instead, I

made my way to Milo's room.

The door was shut.

Bile rose in the back of my throat as the horrendous possibility became more and more real. I stood there for God knew how long, staring at the locked door. I had a master key to the house. It unlocked every door, but I had never used it before. Steadily, I made my way to Milo's door. I pulled out my keys to find the master and turned the lock with trembling hands. Quietly, I pushed the door open a fraction.

Sprawled out on the bed was Raven. On top of her was a naked Milo, fucking her like it was his last day on earth.

I always knew Raven didn't want me, and my feelings were only met with rejection. She constantly chose other men, and for years I wondered how I'd get over her.

Want to know the trick to getting over the love of your life?

Watch her fuck your brother's brains out, and it will kill all feelings inside you resembling love. My insides were so numb that there were no feelings left at all. Love was a feeling, so I guess problem solved.

In the back of my disgustingly optimistic mind, I had always hoped Raven would wake up one day and realize her best friend was the love of her life. Like in one of those chick flicks, I had hoped it would work out between us. This scene in front of me changed those hopes. Those possibilities and optimism were now gone, tarnished.

Raven fucked my brother. There could never be an "us" after that. She had sealed the deal.

I should look away. I should close the door, except I didn't.

I watched them, imprinting the image in my mind. I took mental photos. Fuck that. I took a mental video. If my dumb-fuck mind thought of her in that way again, like the girl I once loved, I'd reach inside for this memory. I'd remind my heart of these images, of Milo climaxing inside Raven as he

held her close. These images would shut down everything like it was doing right now.

In a way, it was good this happened. I gave Raven every ounce of my heart, and watching her fuck my brother snapped me out of it. I was finally free of her love. There was nothing called love inside of me anymore, so now we could be friends.

I wasn't angry or jealous. For the first time in seventeen years, I felt nothing. Utterly dead on the inside. My heart was hollow. Empty. Blank. Nothingness.

It was fucking beautiful.

This was what I needed. This dose of reality.

I always thought my love for her was unconditional. It wasn't.

This was apparently the one condition. It was the one string Raven could have pulled to kill my love, and she did it. She pulled the trigger.

I slowly shut the door and walked downstairs. I almost ran into Juli/July/Jules as I took the last step.

"There you are," she smiled. "I was looking for you. Ready to head out, or did you want to stay here longer?"

"No, let's go. I am done."

For the first time in my life, I truly meant it. I was so done.

CHAPTER 4

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DECEMBER 2015



Milo

I PUSHED THE DOOR OPEN TO RAVEN'S ROOM AND MARCHED INSIDE. RAVEN visibly rolled her eyes at me, unimpressed by my presence.

It was fucking irritating. Raven used to do everything in her power to be near me. Now all she did was roll her damn eyes, looking at me with contempt, but she wasn't getting out of this. She would talk to me, one way or the other.

"We have to talk," I announced.

"We don't," Raven predictably refused to have an adult conversation.

Raven's sarcastic attitude was on my last nerve. I clenched and unclenched my jaw, hating how she looked at me. I wanted her to look at me like she used to—like I was her whole damn world. Why did she refuse to look at me that way?

The sternness was only causing the fleeting look of fear to wash over her face. I stared at Raven for a long while in an attempt to cool off.

"I hate hurting you," I finally muttered under my breath.

"Well, thank you for that. Now, please leave."

I winced at her tone. This wasn't my Raven. Raven always tried to understand the other side. "Rave, I don't want to keep pushing you, but you refuse to talk about us. I'm losing it here."

"Milo, go find someone else to fuck. All the girls who came over last weekend were dying to sleep with you. Choose one of them and leave me alone. They won't mind your horny episodes or your bipolar mood swings."

I flinched again.

My behavior was abhorrent, and I had turned the most compassionate girl against me. Was I breaking her that much? I must be mentally incapacitated.

I closed my eyes and tried once more. "Raven, you have every reason to hate me. I don't know what I can say to make it better. I can't. I have no excuse for my behavior. I can only tell you that I can't live without you. I love you. I love you so fucking much. I don't know how to make it stop. I feel like the only way it will is if I rip my fucking heart out."

"In that case, you are doing the most heinous things in the name of love. If you loved me so damn much, how could you do what you did?"

I quietly studied her distraught face, making my heart thud louder. I was chained to her with invisible shackles. Yet, I was the predator, and she was the victim. I wasn't safe for her if she truly didn't love me. If she didn't believe me, she should have me locked away. "You are right. You should tell everyone what I did. I deserve whatever punishment I get."

Raven looked disturbed by the suggestion. "I can't do that."

Why? Because she loved me.

Of course, she did, but Raven wouldn't fucking admit it. This chick had turned me inside out. If she hated what I was doing to her, why would she deal with it if she didn't love me? She loved me. She was just fucking crazy and refused to admit it.

"If you're not going to tell them, then be with me."

“Never.”

Anger seeped through me. I was fucking frustrated and on the verge of losing my patience. She was unreasonable, and I had no idea how to reach her.

"Rave, you're so out of touch with your emotions that you don't understand your own feelings. You love me, but it's like you can't access that part of yourself. Why are you doing this to yourself? Why are you doing this to me?"

Raven shook her head, dismissing me like she always did. Predictably, Raven used another avoidance method to walk away.

I grabbed her by the elbow before she could do the same fucking thing, and Raven turned to slap me right across the face. “Do not fucking touch me!” Raven roared.

“You are such a confused little girl,” I yelled back. “You don't know what you want. You need me to tell you what you want, like always.” After all, Raven told me she loved me, but she was young and didn’t see things clearly. So, I had to decide for the both of us. Truth be told, we never had a choice in the matter. We belonged together; there was nothing more to it. It’d be unnatural otherwise, and I couldn’t fight nature any more than she could fight her destiny.

“I don't love you. Now get off me.”

I grabbed her wrist as she tried to twist out of my hold. She couldn’t. She couldn’t leave me. Nothing in life would make sense if we weren’t together. She was mine in every sense of the word.

Raven screamed for me to stop. For a moment, I considered precisely that—stopping this insanity. However, an immediate panic and unbearable desperation took over. I couldn’t stop. Raven understood our physical connection. It was the only time she didn’t overanalyze things.

In the snap of a moment, I was on top of her, pinning her to the floor. “Please, baby, please don't fight me. I love you so fucking much. You are all

I ever wanted.”

Raven thrashed underneath; her shirt ripped to pieces, and buttons scattered everywhere. Things were getting out of control. Raven looked scared, and she was crying. I should stop, and I would have if there were another way. We had to connect. I couldn't breathe without her, but if she gave in, everything would be okay again.

I desperately kissed her face and neck. Raven kept fighting me, so I pinned her wrists on top of her head. I yanked her shorts down, shaking with my need for her.

Barely aware of her screams and hits, I breathed into her ear, “I can't live without you, baby. You are in my system, imprinted on my soul. Just love me. That's all I want. I'll make you so happy, I promise.”

I pushed two fingers inside her while biting her neck and breasts. When her wetness coated my fingers, a huge relief washed over me. She wanted me.

I kissed her feverishly, pouring every bit of my desperation into it. I kissed her like a maniac as I yanked my sweatpants down to slip inside her.

Sweet fucking heaven.

My home, inside my Raven.

I worked on her clit with my fingers and finally heard Raven set off. Everything else faded away when she fell apart. We came together, with me holding her close.

It wasn't until I cleaned up and carried her to bed did I realize the weight of my actions.

Raven was unresponsive, shaking uncontrollably. There were still tear remnants on her beautiful cheeks. She was the calm before the storm. There was a different type of anger brewing inside Raven. One that told me nothing would be the same after this moment. She didn't see it my way and would never forgive me.

I had finally pushed her too far. Raven looked broken, and I had lost her for good.

I pretended to be asleep, but my hold on her remained ironclad. Even after losing her, and while unconscious, I'd never let her go.

The Next Day



Reid

“What do you mean by leaving?” I tilted my face at Raven.

“I mean that I am departing, exiting, going away from here,” Raven sassed back.

I rolled my eyes. “Thanks, asshole. I know what the word leaving means, but I don’t understand why now.”

“Why not now? I am basically done with my semester. I spoke to all my teachers today and only have a few assignments left. They agreed to let me email them since I got accepted to my remote internship in Paris. As long as I complete the internship, I’ll graduate in the spring. It makes sense to leave for Paris now so I can settle in.”

I was baffled as Raven packed her suitcase with manic speed, barely informing me about flying to Paris within a few hours. This was sudden. I had no idea what brought this on, but I tried to calm her down.

“Raven, you are seventeen. Don’t you need a parent or someone to buy your ticket? I thought if you’re underage, you can’t travel unless a parent or guardian approves it, and I doubt Milo will approve it.”

“I don’t give two fucks what Milo will approve of,” Raven snapped.

It became awkwardly quiet in the room. I watched her apprehensively as she continued to pack like a beast.

I never confronted her about Milo, nor did she know I saw them having sex. Something terrible must have happened between them for her to make such a quick exit.

What was I missing here?

“Did something happen between Milo and you?” I asked quietly, unsure if I wanted to hear the answer.

“No,” Raven said curtly.

Something bad must’ve happened between them if she was avoiding the topic. It made me happy to hear, though I didn’t care to understand why. As far as I was concerned, I had buried any feelings for her six feet under.

However, as her friend, I was worried.

“Rave, think about it for a second. Paris will still be there. Why not leave after the semester is over?”

“I have already thought about it and have made my decision.”

“When?”

“Last night.”

“You made this decision last night and are putting this plan into action tonight. You never think this emotionally. What is going on with you?”

Raven’s eyes were downcast, with a wretched expression on her face.

My newfound emotional “freedom” was immediately disturbed. I had locked away my insufferable love for her in a coffin, buried it deep inside, and vowed never to open the coffin. Yet, I wasn’t strong enough to watch her be miserable.

So, I said the only thing she wanted to hear. “Rave, you don’t have to talk about anything you don’t want to.”

“Thank you,” Raven whispered back.

“So, what’s the game plan?” I could at least make sure she was safe.

“I bought my ticket using Mom’s credit card. I’ll text her on the way to the airport that I am coming to Paris.”

“She doesn’t know?”

“No. I don’t want her texting Milo, but it’s okay. I have a key to her apartment.”

Theressa might be a negligent narcissist, but she wasn’t cruel. She loved her daughter in her own way. Raven would have a place to stay, money, and everything else she needed. The only thing Theressa couldn’t commit to was attention or time.

“Okay...” I said slowly. “Then what?”

“I’ll start my internship at the Paris School of Fashion in a month. I’m going to room with a couple of the other girls from the program. They are also from out of the country, so the school paired us in case we wanted to lodge together. I don’t want to live with Mom, and this made the most sense.”

“I know you talked about doing the remote internship, but I didn’t know it was so set in stone.”

“I didn’t want to say anything until I knew if I wanted to do the remote internship.”

I frowned. “But don’t you have to meet with your counselor to discuss your application to FIT? Shouldn’t you at least do that before you leave?”

Raven visibly tensed. “Reid,” she said softly. “I am not going to FIT. I’m not coming back for graduation, either. I am having them mail my diploma. I am going to go to the Paris School of Fashion for college. I am going to stay in Paris for good.”

I blinked.

I thought I was emotionless, that I was dead inside. One moment. One sentence. That’s all it took.

It all returned like a hurricane. I was feeling emotions and lots of them.

And my first thought—Fuck her!

Fuck! Her!

My life, my whole fucked up mess of a life, was all her fault.

She was the reason for my complete emotional wreckage. The years of pining after her. The years of torture. My anger. My on-and-off relationship with my brother. The extensive mental abuse she put me through. I wouldn't be this broken if Raven and I weren't born together.

The man I had become was because of this stupid notion we were destined for each other. I could never go back. I could never be a different man because she had already shaped my life.

I never had the opportunity to grow up without being tethered to her. The need for her dictated every relationship and every decision in my life. I could have been a different human being if we weren't born together.

But we were, and she fucked me up. She bulldozed over me only to leave me and never come back. I didn't apply to colleges in Paris because I didn't think she had, either. This had nothing to do with whatever bullshit happened between her and Milo. This was pre-planned, and she didn't bother looping me in. She had no intention of us going to Paris or staying in New York together. All the while, she led me to believe otherwise.

I spent years being angry at Milo. I thought he was taking her away from me, but it was never Milo's fault. It was Raven's.

I confronted her about her feelings for Milo. She said it was nothing but brotherly love, but it wasn't. She actively pursued him. He wasn't aware of how I felt about her. I never confronted him and had no right to be angry at Milo, but every right to be mad at her.

She lied to me, and I still looked the other way for the sake of our friendship. I held onto the fact we were best friends with an unbreakable bond. She couldn't even let me hold on to that much.

All my life, I compared every woman to her. I destroyed my relationship with Milo over the years because of Raven. The man raised me as his own

kid, sacrificed his childhood, so I could have a better one, and all I asked was for Raven not to be with him. She did it anyway. Now that it didn't work out between them, she was leaving.

She was so fucking selfish.

"Wow. You really gave me the middle finger, didn't you? Were you going to tell me or let me figure it out on my own?" I didn't yell or scream. My words were calm and disciplined.

Raven looked scared. She had never seen this fury because I had never been this furious. Not even when I saw her fucking my goddamn brother. Every time I thought she couldn't do anything worse, she wrecked me once more.

"I-um Reid, I wasn't sure about my decision—"

"We are done."

"What?"

"We. Are. Done." I enunciated each word.

"What do you mean by done?"

"I mean that we are finished. We are through, ended, terminated, concluded."

Raven rolled her eyes. "I know what the word 'done' means. Stop being immature, Reid. This is—"

"Get out of my house," I said through gritted teeth.

Raven stared at me in complete shock.

"Reid!"

"Get. Out." I gritted out, barely able to contain my anger.

"Calm down—"

"I wish my family never took you in. I wish we left you to rot in that empty house," I said quietly, but she heard it because Raven gasped.

Loving her had shut down everything good inside me. So, she might as well see the ugliness left behind. I took a step forward, my face contorting with anger.

“No wonder your parents left you. You are toxic. You destroy everything you touch, and now you are leaving without bothering to talk about it. I never want to see your face. If you feel grateful for what my family did for you, don’t contact me again. Don’t come near me. Don’t reach out even if you are lying on your deathbed or taking your last breath. I don’t want anything to do with you. Ever.”

Your closest friends could hurt you because they mean more than strangers, but your best friend or soulmate could hurt you better because they knew how. I resurfaced Raven’s deepest insecurities and used her pride to wound her. I’d never sink so low unless I wanted to end our friendship for good, and I did. There was no turning back from this; we both knew it. So, she remained quiet as the silent tears rolled onto her cheeks.

I didn’t care. I hated her.

If I ran into her again in this lifetime, it’d still be a lifetime too soon. Turning on my heels, I slammed the door shut without looking back.

CHAPTER 5

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MAY 2018



Reid

ONE OF THE PROBLEMS WITH ENDING A FRIENDSHIP WITH SOMEONE immersed in your life was that it was never over. Not really.

I might have erased all traces of her in my life, but she still existed in other facets. We had been friends our entire lives. Our fathers were brothers in all but blood, and the Becketts were our closest family. We had attended the same school and shared a friend group. Her closest friends were also my closest friends.

We didn't realize how interwoven our lives were until we separated. Despite the ocean between us, dodging her had proved difficult. Plus, there was the inconvenience of us being born on the same day.

On ~~our~~ my eighteenth birthday, Milo tried to throw me a party. It was the first year I'd celebrate a birthday without her. I was in no mood for a soiree, and Milo could tell by my personality shift.

In his fix-it mode, Milo insisted on sending me and five of my friends on a birthday trip to Mexico—all expenses paid for by Milo. The same friends were invited to Paris for the weekend—all expenses paid for by Theresa.

Personally, I didn't care to celebrate. To be honest, I didn't care for much of anything nowadays. I never felt anything, and it was fucking great. I might not be happy or excited, but my heart also wasn't breaking every fucking second of every fucking day. After years of pain and suffering, it was better this way. No more heartbreak. No more feelings. Just obsolete and nothingness.

I spent my days studying and my nights drinking and fucking. That was all there was to my life. So, I backed out of my birthday plans to let her have our friends. However, she also contacted our friend group to inform them that she decided against celebrating her birthday. Our friends went from having two all-expenses-paid international trips to none. The teenagers were pissed.

The same thing happened the following year. My detached-from-life personality exasperated Milo, and he contacted my friends to redo the trip from last year. Once more, the group felt awkward because Janeen wanted everyone to go to Paris for her.

Our group consisted of privileged kids; scattered between New York, LA, and Europe. Now that we were adults, it was customary for us to take weekend trips for birthdays, spring break, and New Year's Eve as an excuse for a reunion. We were invited to the same trips but had an unspoken understanding. If one of us RSVP'd to a trip, the other quietly backed out. More often than not, she backed out.

I had to hand it to her. She'd never act in an un-classy way; it was beneath her. Following her lead, I never made it an issue, though our friends picked up on the tension. This year, they preemptively hounded us for months to restart the tradition of celebrating our birthdays together and settled on a neutral territory—Jaco, Costa Rica.

Was it possible for me to say no?

Absolutely. I could have said no and put my foot down.

However, somewhere in that sick, masochist mind of mine, I wanted to see her again. I had been walking around this hollow shell of a body for too

long. There would finally be something more than hollowness if I saw her again. I wanted to feel, so I agreed, as did she.

Our friend, Janeen, took the lead by booking the flights and a massive Airbnb. I insisted on footing the bill for our accommodation, not wanting to give her the upper hand. Money wasn't much of a challenge anymore. Growing up, we considered ourselves upper middle class, though outsiders might have regarded us as rich. After Milo graduated from college, he never let us worry about money again. He created an app while in college, and as the majority share owner of the app, he was very successful. I never asked him for anything, but he took care of my bills, regardless.

Leave it to Milo to make it impossible to hate him, and I didn't. I didn't hate my brother for what happened with Raven. As much as I wanted to, I was pretty sure he hated himself more. He was sullen after the whole experience, drowning in self-loathing. My guess? He felt awful for letting it get so far with Raven.

Milo knew of her feelings but never encouraged her crush. He was drowning when he had to become our parent. A lot of it was my fault. She had a calming effect on him, admired him, and gave him unconditional support. When he thought Raven expressed an interest in Asher, I guessed he felt threatened about losing his support system and gave in. Obviously, the responsible Milo emerged after the momentary lapse in judgment. He broke it off, which explained why Raven made such a quick exit for Paris. The rejection wounded her pride.

I almost understood why Milo sought her out for comfort. He relied heavily on Raven for his sanity when he couldn't rely on me.

What was her excuse?

She had none and fucked me over by pursuing Milo. After shattering my life, she up and left. Despite my numbed feelings, I could still hate her for that.

So, this joint birthday trip wasn't a good idea. In fact, it was a terrible one, though it was too late to change my mind. Raven was finally in front of me

in all her glory.

Raven. I hadn't said the name in years. I didn't even let myself think of her name, blanking all thoughts of her from my mind.

There was no way to avoid her or her name any longer. I came straight to the Airbnb after my flight landed in Costa Rica. I met with the owner of the luxurious accommodation overlooking the ocean. The door flew open as soon as he left, with Raven standing at the door frame. She was here... without our other friends to provide the much-needed buffer.

Janeen booked me an earlier flight than everyone else. I found it suspicious, though she insisted I arrived earlier for my birthday surprise.

Why did I trust our friends? They were liars. They obviously had us arrive early to hash it out.

I momentarily forgot to hate Raven as I took her in. She didn't seem real.

She had always been stylish, but now there was a Parisian influence in her look. Her hair was darker than before, flying all over due to the wind from the open door. She wore a beach hat and a sundress revealing a torturous amount of skin. Her legs were tanned, but her face was pale against her perfectly rosy lips. She was still un-fucking-believably gorgeous though she was a little too skinny. Her face lacked its previous glow—as if her inner light was gone.

Who cared?

I reminded myself of all the lies and deceit. She was nothing but a pretty face, a face that ruined me.

Raven rolled in her carry-on and shut the door behind her. We were face-to-face after two and a half years apart.

“Reid,” Raven finally addressed me.

I almost gasped at the sound I hadn't heard in so long. It squeezed my chest so tight I couldn't breathe or move. One word and she was already melting the ice I had layered around my heart.

I missed her so fucking much.

“How have you been?” I asked because her state genuinely concerned me.

Raven tucked her hair behind her ear. “Good. How about you?”

“I’m fine.”

“Happy birthday.”

“To you as well.”

We stood awkwardly. Neither of us knew what to say in a situation like ours.

Since her move, Raven had only kept in touch with Mia, my parents, and our select group of friends. When Milo found out Raven left for Paris, he threw a shitstorm. He flew to Paris but returned alone. It was impossible to read Milo afterward, and I didn’t try. I had my own shit to deal with. Shockingly, Mia didn’t ask, either. So, none of us offered her an explanation.

I blamed Raven for destroying our family. In reality, she was the only one holding us together. Despite the drama between us, Raven was the one organizing family nights and things none of us deemed necessary. Without her efforts, our home became suffocatingly quiet and turned into a sham—cursed and empty.

Laughter died off, as did family nights. The three of us walked around like zombies, but none of us talked about it. I became dead on the inside, detached from life. Milo pulled away from the rest of us, filling his time with work. Mia bottled everything up on the inside.

With Milo’s new influx of income, Dad didn’t have to remain in the Cayman Islands, nor did he have to work long hours, so our parents returned home.

Milo purchased a condo in Soho and moved out. However, he barely visited New York with his rigorous travel schedule. He flew from city to city,

promoting his app to various financial institutions. He lived on the road and seemed to prefer it that way.

The moment I graduated from high school, I moved out as well. I couldn't live in that suffocating house any longer. We all moved away from each other, reuniting on holidays and select weekends. Other than Mia, I barely saw my family, and the same held true of Milo.

"Where are Sam, John, and Ulysses?" Raven asked. "I thought they were flying in with you, Janeen and Mary. Shouldn't everyone be here by now?"

"Hah," I scoffed. "Remember the movie Parent Trap? Seems that's what they set up for us. Janeen booked me an earlier flight. I think they want us to sort our shit."

Raven didn't react, smiling politely.

"So, should we?" I finally broke the silence, unable to take the awkwardness.

"Should we what?"

"Sort our shit."

What the fuck was I saying? It was as if the moment I saw her, none of the awful shit mattered. How did she always have this effect on me?

Raven appeared just as surprised by my suggestion. "I don't think that's up to me," she said flatly.

Irritation pulsed through me. I felt powerless and back to square one. I wanted her to grovel and say that she missed me. I spent my life longing for her; for once, I needed her to feed my ego.

"How's that?" I asked.

She tried to smile. "I believe it was your decision to end our friendship. I never stopped being your friend. You just chose not to be mine."

If only she understood; I had been hers since we were born. "You didn't exactly call to make up."

“I did, but I took the hint when you blocked me,” Raven pointed out.

A momentary guilt fled over me. I had blocked her from every medium, not wanting to initiate contact during a moment of weakness. That was why I barely saw my family.

“It’s okay,” Raven whispered when I didn’t respond. “You did warn me not to contact you.”

“You dropped a bomb on me. I was upset.” I reminded myself she was lethal. She couldn’t be my lover, but she couldn’t be my friend, either. She treated me like dirt.

“I know,” she admitted quietly. “I’m sorry. You have no idea how sorry I am. I have been miserable for the last couple of years, thinking over and over about how I could have done things differently. I—I needed to get away from... New York, but I fucked up. I was caught up in my emotions and forgot we were a package deal. You would have never done that to me. I was selfish.” Raven lowered her eyes.

“Yeah, well. I guess there is no point in rehashing the past. We are both here for the weekend with our friends. Let’s be adults about it and get along.”

Raven’s smile lit up the room. “I think that’s an excellent idea, and thank you for putting this weekend together.”

“I didn’t put this weekend together.”

Raven frowned. “I asked Janeen how much I should pitch in for the Airbnb. Mom would have been happy to pay, but Janeen said you took care of all the bills and activities.”

“I only financed it. Janeen planned everything.”

“Oh. Well, thank you for financing it.”

“You can thank Milo. It was his money.”

We both froze at the mention of his name. I hadn’t meant to bring Milo up. Whatever happened between them must have been bad for Raven to leave the way she did. As much as I loathed her, I could recognize the facts.

“Umm... okay. I’d prefer to pay for my half of the Airbnb.”

“That won’t work.”

“I insist. I can take your money, but I can’t take Milo’s. Don’t ask me why.”

I shook my head. “Milo gave the money to me as a gift. It’s my money now, and I can choose to do with it as I please.”

I could see Raven’s hesitation. She was uncomfortable with this. Very uncomfortable. Why? Milo used to pay for us all the time. It was never a problem before.

“What exactly happened between you and Milo?” I asked hesitantly.

“Nothing.” Raven stared at me blankly. “Hey, so I feel gross after the flight. I’ll take a quick shower and change. Why don’t we grab dinner and catch up afterward?”

I gave her a curt nod. Raven toured the house to decide which bedroom she wanted and disappeared inside one to shower. In turn, I scrounged for alcohol from the fully stocked fridge. This was going to be a long weekend.



The weekend flew by. I thought it was going to be excruciating. A disaster. In reality, it wasn't half bad.

It was challenging to get a rise out of Raven. Derailing her had no effect because she didn’t react. Nor did she hold grudges about how I had spoken to her the last time we saw each other. So it was easy to act civil.

The first night we arrived in Costa Rica, we went to dinner. Our friends came later that night, giving us time to make amends. We spoke for hours. I wouldn’t say we made up, but we got along.

I’d still never see her as the girl I once loved. However, after years of feeling dead inside, I finally felt emotions again, which was exhilarating. I could tell the same held true for Raven. When I first saw her at the

doorway, there was a spark missing. Throughout the weekend, the color on her cheeks returned, and she was lively again.

I learned a lot about her new life. She was attending IFA in Paris for her undergraduate degree. It was a three-year program, and after that, she was to work with her mom as a designer.

As for me, I decided to attend New York University. My undergraduate was a four-year program, so she'd graduate before me.

We never discussed Milo again throughout the weekend.

The weekend was filled with debauchery after our friends arrived. I tried to stay away from Raven, but a traitor inside my chest sought her out. It was the old Reid and Raven, especially when we performed a soliloquy of musical numbers after everyone else went to sleep.

No tune.

No musical talent.

All the wrong lyrics.

Nonetheless, we got drunk and sang our hearts out.

In a way, so much had changed between us, yet nothing had changed.

For the first time in so long, I was human again. When you were so numb, you simply existed in life. Feeling anything was better than nothing at all. Even if that emotion sliced your heart open, watching it bleed to death because that was how it felt when we parted ways at the airport. My heart sliced open as I watched her board the plane, but I couldn't chase after her again. Not after everything.

CHAPTER 6

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3 MONTHS AGO - DECEMBER 2019



Reid

AFTER THE COSTA RICA TRIP, RAVEN AND I KEPT IN TOUCH HERE AND there. The texts were polite at the beginning, periodically checking in. Within the month, the texts had developed into routine messages, and by the start of summer, we were hopping on daily phone and video calls.

Midway through summer, Raven invited me to visit her in Paris, and I agreed.

One might suggest none of this was a good idea, but feeling emotions became the highlight of my life, and I only felt emotions around one person in this world. I'd never fall in love with her again, but I couldn't live life denying what we meant to one another. She'd always be my best friend and my other half. I couldn't change that. Our codependency on each other was unconventional, but it was also the only thing that made me complete. So, I negotiated with myself.

I'd allow myself small glimpses of her, and it'd be enough to make me feel but not enough to destroy me.

Despite what I told myself, I counted the days until my flight to Paris. Initially, anxiety seeped through me at the idea. The last time I spent a

summer in Paris with her, she sprung a boyfriend on me, along with leaving my ass over a text message.

However, things were different this time.

I had heard through the grapevines that Raven had become popular with Parisian men. The information created an odd sensation in my stomach that I chose to ignore.

After reuniting, the tune of the gossip changed. She was no longer entertaining men.

Though I wasn't sure, I believed Raven had figured out I used to be in love with her. Both in Costa Rica and Paris, she was diligent about never entertaining men. If anyone hit on her, she'd scoot away to stand behind me. Raven had always been unaware of male attention, but suddenly, she was on a mission to not flaunt anything in my face. Little did she know how much I had moved on.

Nonetheless, I never corrected her assumptions. It was best if she thought I had feelings for her and continued never to date anyone again. I didn't want her, but I didn't want anyone else to have her, either. I spent the first seventeen years of my life putting her happiness first. It was her turn to do the same. She owed me after the shit she put me through. She could die a spinster, and that was fine by me.

It wasn't like I was jealous or anything. She was nothing more to me than a friend. A very beautiful friend. A friend who seemed to define my very existence. A friend who I'd never want to share with another man. Regardless, she was just a friend.

That's why I couldn't understand why my heart sliced open again after the summer in Paris ended and I returned to New York. Over the following semester, I itched to return to Paris. The cycle repeated itself during every break.

At the beginning of the year, we decided on another joint party in Paris to celebrate our twenty-first birthday. Mia and my parents flew in for the festivities. We celebrated the milestone as we had always planned.

Since my return from Paris, I have returned to my hollow shell once more. I waited impatiently for the next trip—a New Year’s Eve trip to Barcelona. Every day closer to the trip was a struggle as the clock slowed, and I willed the ticking hands to move faster. On the day of the trip, I arrived at the airport four hours early, leaving no room for error. You’d think I’d be exhausted after an overnight flight, but by the time I landed in Barcelona, it was like someone had dumped cold water on me. I was alert, cognizant, and breathing for the first time in weeks.

Our friends decided to celebrate New Year’s Eve in Barcelona at an annual fancy party called Pueblo Espanyol. It was held in a castle, so our friends were excited.

However, I was only excited for one reason. Today was the day I saw Raven again. Today was the day I got to feel again. Like a kid on Christmas, I had been jittery for days. My flight landed an hour ago, and I waited anxiously at the airport for Raven’s arrival so we could take a taxi together.

“Hey, Stud.”

I turned to find a mass of black hair running toward me. “Hi, Beautiful.” I had barely gotten the words out when two arms wrapped around my neck. My heart stopped, then it started beating so hard I thought it might break out of my chest.

“How was your flight?” Raven broke contact to inquire.

“Long. Want to get out of here?”

“Yup, let’s go.”

Exiting the airport, we hailed a taxi to the Airbnb. None of our other friends were here yet, so we were in charge of meeting with the owners and check-in. Thankfully, the house came fully stocked with liquor and food.

After the owners left, Raven made a beeline for upstairs to change. She preferred to wear shorts and tank tops whenever we settled into a place. The only exception to this rule was around Theresa. Raven put on makeup and nice clothes around her mom. It was easier to give in to Theresa than deal

with the nagging. Theresa could nag for hours, while a change of clothing and makeup application took thirty minutes.

Theresa's crazy had reached a new level. She sent an unacceptable email to Raven. I heard about this email before but had only recently read it. Raven must have been devastated, though she never brought it up. I awaited Raven's return to discuss the email, chugging one of the beers from the fridge.

Where is she?

Raven's absence made the house too quiet for comfort, and I impatiently tapped my foot against the bar stool. Finally, I heard footsteps descending the stairs.

"Already drinking?" She nodded at my beer.

"The better question is, why aren't you? We are on vacation."

"Good point. Make me something."

I grabbed the cocktail shaker to make a mixed drink. "So, were you going to tell me about the email from Theresa? Why did I have to hear about it through Janeen?"

"What is there to talk about?" Raven muttered quietly.

"Come on, Rave. You might as well tell me what happened and save me the hassle of digging it out of you."

"Okay," Raven began slowly. "After my parents got back together, I discovered they were never officially divorced, only separated. Dad never wanted a divorce, and Mom never pushed for it. Come to find out, it was because Mom wanted to take Dad back, but she held off because of me."

Recently, Uncle John won Theresa back. The news shocked everyone as Theresa's interest in reuniting with Uncle John was unprecedented. When she was offered the job in Europe, Theresa left both her husband and child behind. In an email to Raven, Theresa admitted Raven was an accident as she never wanted the responsibilities of being a mother and would've taken

Uncle John to Europe if they didn't have Raven. A child was too much responsibility with to her job restraints.

Janeen had discovered the year-and-a-half-old email mentioning these nitty-gritty particulars. If I knew Raven at all, this wasn't something she could easily recover from, especially without the Sinclair clan's support. I didn't pay close enough attention when I first saw her in Costa Rica, but it later sunk in that Raven had dark circles around her eyes. She looked anorexic and didn't make as many jokes.

Over time, Raven reverted to her old self. Her humor had returned, the dark circles were gone, and she had regained her curves. Every time I returned to Paris, Raven was vibrant and full of life. As was I. We were our best versions around each other. That was why it was irritating our parents were the ones to take us down.

When Raven didn't respond, I raised an eyebrow. "Why the hell would she send that email unprovoked?" I asked with frustration.

"It wasn't unprovoked; I confronted them. Why didn't they get back together when I was younger if they were never divorced, and why are they back together now, after I was grown? I bugged them continuously about it. One day, Theresa snapped and emailed me a response."

"She is an asshole. No offense."

"None taken." Raven shrugged.

Raven and I spoke freely. She was the only person allowed to trash Tessa if it seemed fit and vice versa. However, if anyone other than Raven insulted my mother, I'd break their nose.

"Theresa is also full of shit. She could have taken Uncle John back at any point."

"Except she couldn't," Raven countered. "Not without explaining why the family was reuniting while I was left behind in New York. That would have further destroyed her image in front of everyone we knew."

Wow. I shook my head, downing my beer. Theresa really was a fucking bitch. “Rave, why were you still working for Theresa? I get that they are your parents but come on.”

“It’s not them.”

Umm, I had to disagree. “Yes, it is Rave.”

“It’s not,” Raven whispered. “Theresa wanted to live a glamorous life with John by her side. They had to separate because I was too much responsibility. They decided to get back together after I was no longer a factor. I was the one driving a wedge in their marriage. How can I be mad at them?”

Stumped by Raven’s words, I openly gaped at her. I was angry upon hearing about Theresa’s email. My anger only fumed at the thought of Raven continuing to surround herself with people like her parents. However, my concerns should have waited because Raven’s heart was breaking at the reminder.

Fuck.

I moved from behind the counter to gather her in my arms when Raven stood abruptly. “You were right, Reid.”

“Right about what?”

“I am toxic,” she whispered.

“Rave, no,” I said incredulously, but Raven didn’t wait for me to continue. She spun on her heels and marched up the stairs.

I was left rooted and staring at the stairs, incapable of movement.

I wanted to throw things at the wall. I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs. I wanted to call Theresa and Uncle John to threaten murder for making Raven feel this shitty and unwanted. Most of all, I wanted to punch my seventeen-year-old self for saying those awful things to her.

My heart was breaking into so many pieces because her heart was breaking. That’s what happened when you shared one heart, and that’s when the truth

slapped me in the face.

The epic conclusion of my feelings stabbed me in the chest as realization coursed through my veins. The one I had locked away in a coffin. Something I had already admitted to myself deep down but couldn't acknowledge out loud.

I was still madly in love with that emotionally damaged, frustratingly proud, overly analytical, crazy female. She was fucking crazy. She truly was, and I still fucking loved her.

Please, God, when will you stop making me love this crazy woman?

The first question to pop into my head was—Could Raven feel the same for me? If Raven did want me, how would I pursue a woman who lived thousands of miles away? Could I get over what happened with Milo, or would it always factor into an underlying resentment between us? Could I forgive her enough to become the man she needed?

I didn't know the answers to any of these questions. All I knew was I loved her. I was so in love with her that every pain she felt, I felt it tenfold more. I was so in love that my next breath was impossible without her.

I couldn't think straight. My body was immobile, though it didn't matter. I willed myself to move because nothing would stop me from being by her side.

Taking the stairs two at a time, I rushed upstairs. I searched room after room and found her crouched on the floor, unpacking her luggage in the bedroom she had selected.

"You are not toxic," I said from the door frame.

"Oh, hey, Stud," Raven looked up.

"You are not toxic," I repeated.

"I am," Raven whispered. "It's obvious."

"No. You are not," I reiterated. "I was seventeen and a dumb kid who expected you to make your life decisions based on me. It was unfair. I said

horrible things to you out of anger. The truth is you are the only one who made our family whole.”

“No, I was so selfish. I betrayed your trust. You don’t know what I did before I left—”

“I know about you and Milo,” I blurted. I didn’t mean to, but I couldn’t listen to her admissions. I didn’t want to hear her talk about Milo. Couldn’t bear to hear his name on her lips. I communicated as much with Raven telepathically. “Yet, I don’t think you are toxic,” I finished.

Raven was tense, muscles rigid. The tension in the room was palpable. “I am sorry,” she finally spoke.

“It was a long time ago. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

We stared at each other uncomfortably. Finally, I spearheaded the conversation. There was only one thing about her and Milo I wondered about throughout the years. “Why him?” I asked her directly. “He was the one person I told you not to pursue. Why did you pursue him, of all people?” My anger rose at just the little inquiry.

Raven opened her mouth before closing it promptly, contemplating. “I was seventeen and a dumb kid,” she finally responded.

“You can’t use my words against me, Rave.”

“It’s the truth. I was young. I didn’t know better. I got attention from an older man, and I took it.”

“Raven, do you expect me to believe that? You were the mature one in our group.”

Raven blasted to her feet. “See, that’s the problem. People assumed I was so mature when I was just a dumb high school kid. I had always been slow to react and needed time to analyze things at my speed. That’s why I don’t lash out. People perceive it as me being wise beyond my age. I am not. I’m indecisive and overly analytical. It’s not the best thing to hear, but those are my flaws. Every human being is allowed to have them. The truth is I was a dumb kid who had no business making life-altering decisions. Yet I did.”

Raven stopped her rant. A sudden flicker of realization or some sort of acceptance crossed her face.

“We both did,” Raven muttered under her breath. “Milo was young. He made a mistake as well.” Raven stared at her hands. A few moments passed before she spoke again. “Milo might have acted like a responsible adult, but he was the same age as we are. Look at us. All we do is party and travel. He never experienced it because he took care of us. He was stunted in his way. Milo assumed I was this mature woman who could help him when I simply didn’t know better. He made a horrible mistake with me.” Raven’s voice trembled, eyes tearing up. Her breathing hitched as she shuddered. “I was just—”

“—an escape from his shitty life,” I finished for Raven, unable to watch her do this to herself.

“I regret it.” She took a sharp inhale. “I think we both do,” Raven added slowly. “I’m sure he has grown up a lot since we last saw each other, and I hope he turned into the man he was always meant to be.”

I could tell Raven was skimming over crucial details. However, I didn’t want to hear more of this. The Band-Aid had needed to be ripped off. I had confronted her and would rather we never spoke of it again. The thought of her and Milo made me want to crawl out of my skin.

“Can you forgive me?” Raven asked.

“I have known for years. We are still standing, aren’t we?”

Raven jumped into my arms. We didn’t need more words; we only needed each other. I held her so tight I was probably squeezing the life out of her.

“Reid,” Raven snapped me out of my lull.

“Hmm?”

“I’m not working for Mom anymore.”

“You are not?”

“No, but things are now okay with my parents. They both feel guilty about the email.”

“Good, they should.”

Raven laughed. “Things have been civil, but Mom’s business is suffering. We discussed it, and I decided to pursue my career separate from hers. I got an internship with Karen. It’s unpaid but working for her will be good for my resume. I’m moving back to New York.”

Hope. All the hope I had buried reignited like flames in a forest fire. Despite telling myself to pump the brakes, hope spread through me. I had to slow down. I only realized half an hour ago I still loved her. We just discussed the biggest hurdle in our lives. I shouldn’t get ahead of myself, yet I couldn’t stop.

Raven would be in the same city as me. Proximity meant possibility. In the back of my mind, one of my doubts was immediately appeased. If we were in the same city, there was a possibility.

Could she possibly want more with me? There was another hindrance still at large. If she wanted more, could I get over what happened between Raven and Milo to be the man she deserved, or would I resent her?

Until I knew for sure I couldn’t choose anything different for us because I couldn’t deal with it if I hurt her. So, I said nothing more and kissed the top of Raven’s head, keeping her locked in my arms.

CHAPTER 7

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A FEW DAYS AGO - MARCH 8TH, 2020



Reid

“WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO?” I ASKED WHILE REFRAINING FROM ROLLING my eyes.

“I’ll figure it out. I always do,” Raven said with a wave of her hand, casting me her usual nonchalant glance.

“This is ridiculous.”

We were at Raven’s place. It was in a shitty neighborhood, and she shared the apartment with two weirdos. I hated that she lived here, though my dorm was only a few blocks away.

Though my irritation rose, I decided a positive attitude was more productive in this situation. My optimism quickly dissipated as I glanced around. Raven sorted through the mail on the table. One of the dining table chairs was broken. The smoke alarm was hanging off the ceiling. The paint on the wall was chipped. There was an open electric line.

I couldn’t help the pang of pain over her residing in this disgusting hole she called home. No matter how often I asked her, she refused to move back into our family house.

So, I'd had no choice but to suck it up. Raven was stubborn as a mule. She refused my offers to help and wouldn't take my money because Milo was my source of income. She threatened not to talk to me when I bought her groceries.

However, I couldn't hold back anymore. One way or another, she was going to move home. "Rave, I am moving home, too. Move back with me. I don't understand the problem."

Raven smiled again. "Reid, there is no problem. I am fine."

"You lost your job."

"I have savings."

"We both know that's a lie. What's the big deal with moving home, anyways?"

"This is my home."

"This isn't your home. Plus, you don't have a source of income and won't be able to pay rent. What logical reason could you possibly have to keep living here?"

Raven turned quiet.

I continued my rant, hell-bent on making her see reason. "You have no financial support, and you have debt up to your neck. You can barely make rent and groceries as it is. What do you plan to do without a job? You won't take money from me because it's Milo's money. Unlike Milo, I won't come into my trust fund till we are twenty-two which is two months away. I can pay off your debt then, but what do you plan to do in the meanwhile? You are a rational person, Rave. Give me a rational answer." It was harsh, but how else would I get through to her? Why was she so unreasonable?

It hit me, then. Milo. He was the reason she didn't want to move home.

Raven never went into details about her relationship with Milo. As far as I was concerned, they had a one-night stand. The visual shut down

everything inside me for years. I refused the possibility they might have shared more than one night.

“Is it because of Milo?” I asked suspiciously.

“What?” Raven tensed.

My suspicions were confirmed. Why did she still care so much? He didn’t.

Following the irritation came the anger I used to feel as a fifteen-year-old boy. Raging hormones. Out of control. Out of my mind.

“Milo,” I repeated angrily. “Is this because of him?”

“Trust me when I tell you it’s not a good idea for me to move back.”

“Why don’t you want to be around him?” I pressed.

“He is still angry with me for leaving,” Raven said faintly. “I’m not ready to face him. You know me, I hate confrontations.”

I didn’t want Raven around Milo, either. As much as I hated the idea of them in close quarters, Raven’s well-being took precedence. Plus, seeing them together might determine if I could deal with their past. I could finally move on with my life if I saw something unsavory. I shook my head. Who was I kidding? There was no moving on from her; there never had been.

“Rave, you live in New York and are bound to see Milo sooner or later. You might as well bury the hatchet. He is always working, anyways, so I doubt you’ll see much of him. Plus, everyone else is also moving home. How awkward can it be with everyone around?”

Raven stared at me, the logical words getting through to her.

“If it makes you feel better,” I continued, “I’ll stick by you every second of the day and act as your buffer.”

“Even when I sleep?”

I laughed. “I’ll move into your damn room if you want. I have no commitments, so you’ll never be alone and can avoid the awkward

conversation with Milo for as long as you want.”

Raven took a deep breath and nodded firmly. “Okay. I’ll move home.”

I kissed her on the cheek. “You are making the right decision.”

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CHAPTER 8

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MARCH 11TH, 2020



Reid

MOVING MY THINGS AND RAVEN'S STUFF INTO THE HOUSE TOOK A FEW days. We were finally settled in, but something was off. Raven seemed down. Her spirit was heavy, and her smiles were few and far between.

Last night, I thought she was having a mental breakdown. We went to her room, and she kept staring at a spot on the carpet. Later I caught her scrubbing the carpet with a paper towel and bleach. Something was off.

I decided to go for a run to clear my head. Upon returning home, I took my shirt off and threw it in the hamper when I noticed a few texts from Raven. I peeked inside her room, calling out her name when I heard the shower running and noticed the bathroom door was wide open.

Odd.

Other than our parents, none of us knocked when we entered each other's rooms. So, if you were indecent, you locked the door. If you were in the bathroom, you shut the door. Something told me Raven wasn't showering.

I poked my head inside to find Raven standing under the showerhead. She was fully clothed in her black tank top and a pair of sleeping shorts. Raven

stared blankly at the wall as the water rained on her. My heart squeezed in my chest. I walked closer to open the shower door, but she didn't notice my presence.

"Rave? What's going on?"

Raven snapped out of her glazed look and turned her head to the side. "Oh. Hey, Stud."

"What's wrong?" I asked more gently.

"Nothing. Can you give me a few minutes?"

"No."

"What?"

"I said no. I am going to stand here with you."

"If you are going to stand there, at least close the door. You are letting the steam out."

I stepped inside the shower in my gym shorts and stood behind her. The shower was large enough to maintain a safe distance from the water.

Who the hell stood under a shower while fully clothed? I told you this woman was utterly insane.

"Okay, stupid. I meant, stand on the other side of the closed door," Raven laughed.

"I've made my decision. I am standing here in case you change your mind about talking."

Raven appeared surprised but didn't argue. I stood behind her, observing quietly. There was more to the story of Raven's history with this house.

"You never explained why you left New York so suddenly," I said suddenly.

Raven said nothing.

“Why did you leave New York so suddenly?” I asked more forcefully this time.

“I-I... a few things happened that were hard for me to deal with at the time. I hurt you. I slept with Milo. If I had stayed, it would have happened again. So, I left.”

“That doesn’t make sense.” I frowned at the information. “You could have told Milo it was a mistake and moved forward. You didn’t have to move to Paris. All you had to do was end it if you thought you were betraying me.”

“Why are you so convinced I didn’t try to end things?” Raven muttered.

“Did you?”

“Yes.”

“If you ended things with him, why were you worried it would happen again if you stayed here?” I asked in an irritated voice, anger getting the best of me. It resonated with every word, the tension in the shower palpable.

Moving to Paris was drastic. She didn’t have to leave me. All she had to do was tell Milo they had made a mistake. We could have moved on with our lives. She should have stayed in New York as we had always planned.

In typical Raven fashion, she didn’t want to deal with the awkwardness. Well, tough. She had made her bed, then had sex on it with my brother, so she should have laid on it.

“It’s in the past, Reid. It’s not worth discussing,” Raven said tightly. “Milo did a lot for me. I won’t tarnish his name in front of his younger brother. Can we just move on?”

“Tarnish his name? What did he do to tarnish his name?”

Raven tensed as if she hadn’t meant to let the words slip. There was an odd sinking feeling in my stomach. Was there more to the story?

She refused to divulge what made her leave New York. Not to mention, when I first saw Raven again, she looked ghostly. What could have

happened that was so bad?

“Did he do something?” I asked more gently.

“W-what?” Raven stammered.

“Did Milo do something to you?”

My stomach flipped as the atrocious thought took root. It didn’t make sense. Milo would never hurt Raven, though a gut feeling spiraled saying otherwise.

“Did he hurt you?” I whispered.

Raven continued with the silence. I wished she’d tell me because my mind was conjuring the worst. Was there another woman? Did Milo hit her? Did he do something sexually?

“Did he hurt you?” I roared so loud that Raven jumped. My body was shaking, feeling like the ground below was about to cave. What did he do that was so bad?

Raven twisted her torso. “Reid, stop. Milo didn’t hurt me,” she said quickly.

Why didn’t I believe her? “Then what aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing,” she muttered.

I didn’t believe her. There was something off about this situation. “If he hurt a hair on your head—”

“Reid, stop,” Raven said more forcefully this time. “You are ridiculous. Of course, Milo didn’t hurt me. How could you think that?”

Lies. She was telling me all lies, but what was she lying about?

Fine. If Raven didn’t want to discuss Milo, there was something on my mind. I had already suspected her inkling about my feelings. This Milo topic was spurring emotions of my own. I might as well put it all out on the table. It was time.

Neither of us had directly addressed the issue. Twenty-one years, and we had never once discussed the elephant in the room.

“When you and Milo hooked up, did you know how I felt about you?” I let the words sink in. My heart was beating in anticipation of Raven’s answer.

Raven’s silence confirmed my suspicions. Although I had assumed she knew, I couldn’t help the irrational anger coursing me.

“You knew!” I growled, grabbing her by the back of her shoulders.

Raven jumped from the volume of my voice echoing through the bathroom.

“You knew how I felt about you, but you did it anyway. You fucked my brother, Rave. How could you do that to me?” I panted, shaking her ferociously.

“I didn’t know,” Raven whispered. “Not at the time. Once I found out, I didn’t want to keep hurting you. It was one of the reasons why I left. I made a mistake with Milo. I tried my best to fix it, but it made you hate me instead.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” I yelled. Our voices echoed in the enclosed shower as our words bounced between the walls. “What do you mean you’d keep betraying me if you stayed? All you had to do was not have sex with him again. Why couldn’t you do that? How hard is it to keep your knees together? Or were you so enthralled like every other woman by the great Milo Sinclair that you couldn’t be near him without having to fuck him? Tell me.”

“I made a mistake,” Raven said quietly. “I told you that. After it was over, I had to get away from here. That’s all there is to it.”

We were going around in circles. Raven wasn’t giving me a straight answer about why she left, and my anger wasn’t dying out. She still pursued Milo after I told her not to. The betrayal alone was a tough pill to swallow, but the hardest pill was the possibility of her never feeling the same for me.

“When I was younger, I always thought we would somehow end up together,” I said in a low voice. “I thought you would snap out of your

cynicism. I thought you'd get over whatever fascination you had with older men. I thought you'd finally see me." I shook my head. "What is so hateful and unlovable about me you couldn't possibly see me in that light?"

Raven gave out a husky laugh.

Anger rinsed through me. I was pouring my heart out, and she was laughing in my face. My fingers flexed in her shoulders, tightening the grip.

"When I was younger, I always thought we'd somehow end up together," she muttered.

Raven repeated my words, but her following sentence filled my hollow words with the meaningfulness I sought.

"Everyone always told us as much, so an optimistic side of me thought that's where life would lead us. This was before my cynicism for love. This was before my parents' separation. This was before I saw Tessa and Uncle Reese. This was before we became part of the same family. I didn't see you that way after growing up, but when I was little, I spent hours writing Mrs. Reid Sinclair in my notebook. So, there is nothing hateful or unlovable about you. You're the best man in the world and can make any girl fall in love with you. The problem lies only with the person I have become."

I couldn't move. All these years, the misunderstandings, my failed attempts to tell her about my feelings, while she had felt the same way I did when we were younger. If she felt it once, could she feel it again?

Right then and there, I received the answer to my last question. Could I get past Raven sleeping with Milo?

I could because none of the rest mattered the moment she said those words. I wasn't concerned with right or wrong. I didn't care if she slept with my brother. She was the only thing I had ever wanted, and I couldn't live without her.

I moved without direction or a plan, pushing Raven's long dark hair off to one side and placing a small kiss on her neck. I stopped for a heart-

pounding second, breathing in her scent. The small act had me wound tight, paralyzed.

Raven tensed. Without giving her a chance to react, I spun her in place. I grabbed her waist, pinning her against the shower wall. Before Raven could speak, my lips came colliding against hers. One of my hands went to her hair while the other cupped her face. I kissed her aggressively to show her what I was pouring into it. Years of yearning, longing, and pining came out with one kiss. I kissed Raven like it was the last time I'd kiss anyone. I pushed my tongue inside her mouth and explored her. Her soft lips, her moist mouth; it was electrifying. Dynamic.

The hot water had run out, and we were being doused by cold water. The cold water didn't affect how hard I was for her. My breathing shuddered, heart racing. My ears pounded as I kissed her desperately. This was everything, what I had wanted all my life, and I was never willing to let go.

Except, Raven was willing to let go. She gently pushed me back—eyes lowered—without offering an explanation.

“Why?” I asked. Why was she stopping this? This was what we had both wanted since we were babies.

“You know why.”

“Because of Milo?”

“I have made some bad decisions in my life, Reid, and I am working on cleaning up my mess. I have to make better decisions moving forward. This is not it.”

“Raven—”

“Please, Reid. I am begging you. Don't make me into this person. Don't make me the person who can't face myself because I'm disgusted by my behavior. I love you with all my heart. I'll give you my kidney. Hell, I'll give you every single one of my organs if you need it. I'll die for you, but I can't do this for you.”

My head rested on her neck. I had never wanted anything so much in my life. I wanted this more than my next breath. However, Raven wanted to stop because she slept with Milo. She couldn't deal with herself if she felt cheap, and if I pushed her, that's how I'd make her feel.

I couldn't do that to Raven. That's not love.

I took a step back and let her go. Turning around, I exited the shower as Raven turned off the water. Closing the bathroom door behind me, I returned to my room.

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CHAPTER 9

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MARCH 12TH, 2020



Reid

I DIDN'T SLEEP LAST NIGHT.

I stayed up all night thinking about our kiss. It was a kiss twenty-two years in the making and didn't disappoint.

We wouldn't be here if I had told her about my feelings years ago. I should have told her when we were twelve instead of waiting a decade. There would have been no one else for us, and we could have been pure and preserved, the way our love was meant to be.

Some of it might be tainted now. Nonetheless, it was still pure because what I felt for her was the purest form of love anyone had experienced.

Raven told me she also thought we might end up together. After growing up, she lost faith in love. Maybe I needed to reinstall faith in her again. She needed to open her eyes and give us a chance. I couldn't return to how things were, not after that kiss.

I had been moving the remaining things from my dorm today, and Raven was at work. So, we hadn't had any interaction. The last day of her

internship was tomorrow before the office closed. I was busy tomorrow as well, tying up loose ends on campus.

So, I had to address it with her tonight. It was ten p.m., but Raven was still up.

“Hey, Beautiful.” I poked my head in.

Raven smiled nervously. “Hey, Stud. How was the move?”

“It was exhausting. I have to return tomorrow and have a few more things to take care of. I’ll be gone all day again, so I wanted to check in with you.”

I stepped into the room. Raven was on the bed with her laptop out. Her floor was covered in boxes and clothes, looking like Tessa’s room from back in the day. It was a mess.

“Did you have a good day?” I moved a couple of things to join her on the bed.

“Mostly. I have been unpacking and changing up the room.”

“I think everyone is going to officially move in tomorrow.”

“Oh.”

I eyed her tentatively. She didn’t sound thrilled by the news. She didn’t want to see Milo, and I didn’t want to be another person with a strained relationship with Raven. We had to sort this out.

Raven beat me to it. “Reid, we need to talk.”

I nodded in agreement. “Yes, we do.”

“Reid,” she stated. “I can’t lose you. You are my best—”

“I love you,” I blurted before I could stop myself. I couldn’t listen to her about how I was her best friend. Or her brother from another mother. I loved her. She had already guessed it, so I needed to man up and say it at least once. I owed it to myself.

“And I love you,” Raven replied.

“That’s not how I meant it. At least have enough respect not to condescend me.”

This conversation was quickly turning sour. That’s the thing with rejection; it could flip things and haunt you. I had endured years of rejection, first from my mother, then from Raven. It was all returning in a flash and boiling down to this moment.

Somewhere deep down, I had hoped for a different response from Raven.

“I’m sorry,” Raven conceded. “You’re right. When we were little, our families joked we’d end up together. It was ingrained into both of us. Deep inside my optimistic mind, I thought it could be a possibility. As I grew up, I only saw the ugly sides of love. I lost faith, and the faith has never been restored. So, I shelved the idea away.”

Raven stood to pace. So, I stood as well and dogged her steps.

“After we grew up, I saw you as my family member,” Raven continued. “As far as I am concerned, you and Mia are my only family. I can’t give you more than that. The side effects of romantic love have always been my destruction. Every bad thing that happened in my life stemmed from romantic love. Can you at least understand that?”

“Just because it happened to other people doesn’t mean it’ll happen to us. We are different. We are best friends—”

“I also thought Milo was my best friend,” Raven muttered, looking at the same spot on the carpet she was cleaning the other day. Did she spill something? She didn’t have OCD tendencies about cleaning. I could hardly focus on it, though, too hyped by my emotions.

“So, this is about Milo?”

“Yes,” Raven sighed. “I can’t fathom being the slut passed between the Sinclair brothers.”

“I don’t see it that way.”

“Yet, that’s how it is.”

“Rave, please—”

“There are other things that scare the shit out of me. Milo used to be one of my best friends, but our friendship changed, and within a short time, it destroyed everything. My relationship with you. My friendship with Milo. My family. It cost me everything I cared about, and I walked around like a corpse for years. That’s the after-effect of romance. It destroys and burns until there is nothing left. I am sorry, Reid. I can’t risk it; I can’t risk losing you.”

I understood where she was coming from. I truly did. Raven didn’t want to feel cheap, and if anyone had bad experiences with love, it was Raven. However, I couldn’t do this anymore, either. There was no going back for me. I wasn’t angry at her, only sad. I couldn’t be around her and feel this way. It was torture.

“Raven, I am sorry. I can’t do this,” I said quietly. “I can’t be just your friend anymore. It’s too hard.”

Raven stopped short and stared at me with wide eyes screaming with shock. I turned to leave, but Raven lunged at my back and covered me with a hug.

“Please, please, Reid. Don’t do this again. I am checking my pride at the door. I’ll beg if you want. Please don’t leave me again. I can’t live without you.”

I spoke without turning to face her. “If you can’t live without me, why can’t you be with me?”

“Reid, I already told you—”

This time I did turn and grabbed Raven by the arms. “You told me you don’t want to be passed between the Sinclair brothers, but no one knows about you guys, and we can tell Milo not to say anything, either. It was years ago, and Milo has more than moved on. It could be as if it never happened. I’m the only one with a right to be pissed, and I don’t care. I don’t care about anything that keeps you from me. So, what the hell is the problem?” I growled.

Raven opened her mouth, but I cut her off. I wasn't done with my tirade.

"You once told me true love was the familial and friendship type of love. Guess what? I am your best fucking friend. I'm your true family. By your definition, I am the only true love you'll know."

"Reid, I—"

"No, Raven! No more excuses. I love you. I have loved you since we were born. Enough already. I'm not asking you to say it back; I am only asking for a chance. Just try. If I am truly your soulmate, why can't you at least try?"

"It's complicated, Reid."

"Then I can't be around you. I can't watch you with someone else. It'll kill me."

"There is no one else," Raven shrieked. "If you haven't noticed, there hasn't been anyone in the last two years. I don't care to be with anyone. I just can't lose you or Mia."

Raven's plea might stir my heart, but I was a determined man. I had one mission. Nothing else mattered.

"If I can come back from the fact you slept with my brother, I can never move on from you," I admitted in a whisper.

I pulled Raven into my arms. Raven seemed reluctant but stayed put.

"Rave," I said softly, resting my forehead against hers. "You said you couldn't live without me. I can't live without you, either. You don't want to be with anyone else. I don't want to be with anyone else, either. So, why can't we be together and make each other happy? Maybe, it'll only make me happy initially, but with time, I can make you happy, too. You have to give this a chance. What do you have to lose if you don't plan to be with anyone else?"

Raven said nothing, eyes closed.

She had unfinished business with Milo. That's why she didn't want to return to this house. Initially, I wanted Raven to face Milo and ensure it was truly over between them. However, my intentions have since changed. After our kiss, I didn't want to reopen the possibility of her exploring things with Milo. She needed a final push to choose me.

Your soulmate knew what to say to make you hate them. They also knew what to say to make you fall freely into their arms. Everything I was about to tell her was true, but I had to verbalize her innermost desires in a way that would resonate.

"Rave, you are my family. You are my everything. If we are together, you'll never be alone. I am buying a condo after I come into my trust fund. If we are in a relationship, we can move in together. Mia also asked to live with me. We can be a family again. If you decide to be with me, you'll have everything you want. If you don't, you'll lose everything right now."

Raven stared with glossy eyes. I could see the wheels turning in her head, and her body language was complacent. I didn't waste a second and kissed her cheek. I pressed another kiss closer to the corner of her mouth. This time I hovered above her lips, breathing heavily.

Raven looked glazed as I gently kissed her lower lip and lingered. I licked her bottom lip when Raven finally stirred.

"Reid," she put one hand on my chest to push me away. I didn't budge.

"Take some time to think about it," I said hoarsely. "Use your crazy analytical skills, the pros and cons list you need to make, and anything else you need to do. I'll be gone all day tomorrow. I'll give you the space you need. I'm not asking for much here."

Raven didn't respond as I kissed her bottom lip again. One of my hands palmed her face this time while the other pulled her waist to bring her closer. I kissed her like a maniac, hands sifting through her hair. My tongue explored her mouth lewdly. Her smell. Her hair. The shape of her body under my hand. Everything. Everything about this woman drove me crazy and out of my fucking mind.

A little too soon, Raven broke the kiss. I panted, wanting more. However, she already gave in, and I couldn't push her.

"Neither of us wants to be with anyone else, so we have all the time. Just think about it. It's not too much to ask for, is it?" I repeated the thought.

Raven shook her head. "No, it's not," she sighed. "I'll think about it, I promise."

"Good." I closed my eyes, letting my forehead fall against hers. I kissed her gently. "Okay, I'm going to my room before getting any dirty ideas."

Raven laughed. It was still natural between us. The progression of our relationship didn't have to change our dynamic much.

"I'll see you tomorrow." I gave her one last kiss. I couldn't stop kissing her. Never wanted to stop kissing her again.

"Goodnight, Stud. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Goodnight, Beautiful."

I strode out of Raven's room. After years, a weight had been lifted off my chest. We can do this. Raven would get over her reservations, and I could remind her why she used to write Mrs. Reid Sinclair in her notebook when she was little.

A thought occurred to me. I could turn it into a reality. What did I have to lose? If she agreed to a relationship, I'd end up marrying her. We had already been together for twenty-two years. I had sowed my wild oats. Meaningless sex. Endless parties. I was over it. There was only one woman I wanted to have sex with. There was only one person I wanted to party with. We could travel the world, get to know each other intimately, and I could convince her to get married. She could work on her career without working a part-time job. Raven wouldn't have a problem with me paying the bills if it wasn't Milo's money. We were like one person. My money had always been hers, and everything she had was mine. It was only since Milo started supporting me she turned reluctant of my help.

We were already an old married couple. Once I had my job and trust fund, I could make it our reality. We could live the life I always wanted and make up for lost time, plus more.

However, there was one thing I needed to take care of first. I had to speak to Milo and do right by Raven. I hadn't even told him about Raven moving home.

Stepping into my room, I tried Milo's cell phone first. No answer. He was probably busy with work. I racked my brain for what city he might be currently visiting and sent him a text in case I didn't receive a callback.

Reid: Hey, bro, heads up. Raven is back in NYC & moving back to the house. And... I'm going to ask her to be my girlfriend. Long story, but I think she will say "yes."

I considered my words, then sent another text. Might as well be open with Milo.

Reid: Btw, I need you to pretend like you and Raven never hooked up. She is feeling awkward enough about it. Yes, I found out about you two. No, I'm not mad... anymore. But as payback, I am swiping grandma's ring. I'm giving her two weeks before popping the question.

CHAPTER 10

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MARCH 13TH, 2020



Reid

I HAD PLANNED TO STAY LONGER ON CAMPUS TO FINISH MY ERRANDS. However, Mia texted me, asking me to come home. Milo was home early and asked Mia to gather everyone.

Our house would be packed at capacity over the next few weeks. Uncle John and Theressa moved back to the USA. They were in Boston, gathering their remaining belongings from their storage unit. They were arriving today as well.

Milo wanted to discuss living arrangements since so many people would live together.

Whatever.

Hailing a cab, I made my way home, excited about my future possibilities with Raven.

Years of waiting led to this damn day, and it couldn't come soon enough. I should have picked a better date than Friday, the 13th. The date was auspicious, though I was optimistic.

It might be selfish to twist Raven's arm into a relationship, and in the beginning, a romantic relationship between us would only make me happy. However, I was optimistic she'd warm to the idea over time. I could break down her walls and show her we could have the kind of love she dreamt about; Unconditional.

When the driver pulled up to the house, I sprinted out of the cab. Stepping through the front door, I found Mia charging toward me.

"There you are." Mia jumped into my arms.

"Hey, sis." I gave her a quick hug. "Where is Raven?"

"She must still be at work," Mia looked at the time on her phone. "Milo wanted to figure out the living arrangements. We have never had so many people living in the house before."

"I know. Where is everyone else?"

"We just picked up the Becketts. They are upstairs in the guest room, unpacking. Mom and Dad are in the kitchen. I saw Milo's jacket on the living room chair, so I am guessing he is in his room."

"Alright, let's go see him. Grab Mom and Dad. I'll grab the Becketts."

Mia went to the kitchen to grab my parents. I walked upstairs to find the Becketts in the guest room, and after exchanging pleasantries, we congregated at the top of the stairs.

Milo still hadn't come out of his room, so we decided to walk to his room instead.

Raven hadn't come home from work yet, which was odd. I bet she was still trying to avoid Milo for as long as possible.

We made our way through the narrow hallway and turned the corner. Mom was about to knock on the door when everyone stopped short as Milo's door flew open.

We expected Milo to pop out, but someone else came out from behind the door instead.

Raven.

Wrapped in nothing but a bedsheet and naked underneath, Raven stood at Milo's door frame, and right behind her was Milo in an equally compromising position.

MOTHERFUCKER!

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ISOLATION

DRETHI ANIS

BOOK TWO OF THE QUARANTINE SERIES

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PROLOGUE



FROM: MILO SINCLAIR

To: Raven Beckett

Date: December 31, 2015

Subject: Happy New Year

Happy New Year, Raven. It's weird ringing it in without you.

I know I went too far with you. I didn't realize how much I hurt you until you ran away. Since the first time I flew to Paris, you've refused to see me again, and I hated our last conversation. Can we meet up so we can talk?

-Milo

From: Milo Sinclair

To: Raven Beckett

Date: May 3, 2016

Subject: Happy Birthday

Happy 18th Birthday, Raven.

I'm still in Paris, and I'd like to see you. I've respected your wishes for six months, though I'm worried you won't keep your word. Can you just come out of your apartment? If you feel uncomfortable being alone with me, we can go to dinner with your mom.

-Milo

From: Raven Beckett

To: Milo Sinclair

Date: May 3, 2016

Subject: Re: Happy Birthday

Milo,

We are family. I understand how entwined our lives are and want to move forward from what happened. I promised to try to forgive you IF you left me alone. Yet, it's been nothing but flowers, gifts, texts, calls, and impromptu trips to Paris. None of it resonates as backing off. I can't be magically okay within your approved time frame. Please leave me alone.

-Raven

From: Milo Sinclair

To: Raven Beckett

Date: January 2, 2017

Subject: Mia

Raven,

Did Mia reach Paris okay?

My parents have changed their minds and will join you both for the last week of Mia's break. I'm attaching their itinerary. Their hotel is within walking distance.

I've respected your wishes for the last year. Can we now meet up and talk?

From: Raven Beckett

To: Milo Sinclair

Date: January 2, 2017

Subject: Re: Mia

Milo,

Thank you for the itinerary. I'll be at the airport to pick up your parents. Is Tessa's new medication still causing her nausea? I can stock up on ginger drinks if it's an issue.

Mia got here safe and sound. She's having a blast; I'm attaching photos from her site visits. If it's okay, I'd love it if she could return for her summer vacation. She wants to visit Nice.

I'm sorry, Milo. Nothing has changed on my end, and I'm begging you to move on.

From: Milo Sinclair

To: Raven Beckett

Date: January 2, 2018

Subject: WHAT THE FUCK

Are you fucking serious!? You have been giving me hope for the last two years while fucking other men?

I made a mistake, but I gave you every option to let me rectify it. The only thing you wanted was time. You agreed to forgive me if I left you alone to process what happened. You consented to a discussion about reconciliation after some time had passed. I could have convinced Theresa to let me take you back for your senior year, and there was nothing you could have done about it, but I wanted you to love me of your free will. You told me the only way that would be possible was if I stayed away. So, I did.

I'm not stupid. I knew you were saying what I wanted to hear to get rid of me. I still gave you what you needed so there could be a possibility for us. Is this the possibility you had in mind? This was what you were doing while trying to forgive me? You didn't think I'd find out?

Giving you an option is futile. I'm flying to Paris. First, I'm going to kill the asshole you've been fucking; then, I am coming to see you. If you don't open the damn door to your apartment this time, I'll break it down and bring you back.

Alternately, you can return to New York on your own, and we can forget all of this.

From: Raven Beckett

To: Milo Sinclair

Date: January 2, 2018

Subject: Re: WHAT THE FUCK

- 1) Giving me an option to pick the one you prefer is not giving me a choice.
- 2) I'm not currently in Paris, nor do I plan to return until Mia arrives.
- 3) Who I fuck and don't fuck is none of your business. We're not in a relationship.
- 4) I'm not a minor anymore. Good luck kidnapping a grown woman from a free country.
- 5) I agreed to the possibility of us only if I could forgive you. I haven't forgiven you.

READ THE FINE PRINT!

From: Raven Beckett

To: Milo Sinclair

Date: January 5, 2018

Subject: FUCK YOU

YOU ARE A PSYCHOPATH! Did you go to Paris to beat up my friend? He is in the hospital. I wasn't dating him anymore. What the fuck is wrong with you? Seriously. WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU? Do your worst. I'm not returning to New York, and you can't force me.

From: Milo Sinclair

To: Raven Beckett

Date: January 5, 2018

Subject: Don't push me

I dropped him off at the hospital, didn't I? It's not my fault your "friend" is a scrawny douchebag who fell after one punch and hit his head. Really, that guy?

If you don't want any more of your "friends" to end up the same way, don't do anything stupid like that again. I might not be able to force you to come to New York, but I can stop my sister from going to Paris. I just canceled Mia's ticket. She won't be spending her winter vacation with you. I'm not buying more plane tickets for my parents or sister to visit you again. It's simple. If you want to see them, come to New York.

From: Raven Beckett

To: Milo Sinclair

Date: January 6, 2018

Subject: Re: Don't push me

Milo,

This is our last email exchange. I'm scared of you and don't want to communicate with you any longer. If you have any family-related logistic questions, please go through Mia or your parents. As I promised, I hope to forgive you one day for the sake of our families. For the time being, if you contact me or come near me outside of those parameters, I swear on Mia, there will never be a reconciliation. Please stay away because I want to keep my word, and you know I don't lie when I swear on Mia.

I hope you change your mind about keeping Mia from me. She grew up having me as her sister. This will hurt her as much as it will hurt me.

I hope nothing but the best for you.

-Raven

From: Milo Sinclair

To: Raven Beckett

Date: January 6, 2018

Subject: What is that supposed to mean?

Look, I'm frustrated, and it's hard to keep holding on to the faith that things will change. Can we just meet up and talk this through? I tried calling you, but it's not going through.

MESSAGE BLOCKED

Your message to Raven Beckett has been blocked. See technical details for more information.

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CHAPTER I

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MARCH 13TH, 2020



Milo

I STARED AT THE TWO TEXTS FROM REID BUT COULD ONLY FOCUS ON THE first. A text that had me canceling my meetings and pushing everything out of the way until I found myself standing outside of this familiar house. I cringed at the words as I read them for the hundredth time.

Reid: Hey, bro, heads up. Raven is back in NYC & moving back to the house. And... I'm going to ask her to be my girlfriend. Long story, but I think she's going to say yes.

I had already come up with ten ways to scoop Reid's leering eyes out of their very sockets for looking at Raven that way. Mia, the little shit, knew everything. She told me how Reid felt about Raven. He was lucky I hadn't seen him since the revelation.

It finally made sense why Reid looked as shitty as I felt after Raven left.

There was a dark cloud hanging over Reid. I only saw Raven once after she left, and the same darkness circled her. They both walked around like corpses while separated. Alive, but only in terms of biology, how science would define a living being. Dead in every other way.

Come to find out; Mia had told Raven about Reid's feelings around the time Raven ended things with me. Raven obviously couldn't take hurting his feelings, but she could tolerate wounding mine. I always thought Reid was like a brother to her, but now... I didn't know.

Her coming back means I have kept my word, though she sure as hell didn't.

Was she considering his proposition?

The possibility annihilated my remaining senses. I never thought it feasible to be a bigger monster. I thought wrong. My heart was colder than before—lifeless and black, never to return to its original condition.

That's why it was odd my chest was stirring. My heart was pumping back to life as I stared at a mass of black hair through the floor-to-ceiling window.

My cause for sanity—or insanity, depending on your perspective—and my addiction.

Raven stood in the middle of the living room in a tight, black dress. Not surprisingly, she had on high, red-bottom heels. She was always a sucker for them.

She was more beautiful than I remembered. When I last saw her, she was a teenager, but now she had grown into her pale and rosy skin.

Her black dress exposed her shoulders, and my hungry eyes took her in. I watched with fascination, transfixed by her expressions and captivated by her every move. I couldn't stop this madness. She was too close. This proximity had broken every self-control mantra I had recited and every promise I had made.

It took twenty-one days to break a habit. It'd been four years, and she was a habit I was yet to break. Like a junkie, I was in proximity to my addiction of choice. I should walk away, find a rehab and check myself in, but all I could think about was taking another hit.

Who cared about burning down lives? I'd burn everything down—break every barrier, tear down every wall—until we were surrounded by nothing

but chaos, and the only thing left standing was us.

Unfortunately, our families stood between me and all that mattered.

If that obstacle were gone, would she finally stop holding back? I wanted to say yes. Taking out my phone, I sent a text to Mia. A thrill of excitement mixed with trepidation ran through my veins.

I was triggered by her presence and the threat of losing her for good. There was a fog around me, not letting me come to a better solution than the one I had just conjured.

Raven finally turned and made eye contact. She stood cross-armed with her game face on. All her defenses were up, yet something resembling a smile broke out on my face.

Rushing to the front door, I swung it open.

I halted, needing a full minute to take her in. Raven stared back with a blank expression. Even that didn't piss me off.

"Rave," I started, barely able to keep the glee out of my tone.

She didn't speak but gave me a nod instead.

"How have you been?" I tried to sound friendly, hoping to hear her voice.

"Milo. Come in. Would you like a drink?"

It had been too long since I heard my name on her lips. I felt enchanted but couldn't ignore the humor in the situation. "You're inviting me to my own home and offering me a drink? Shouldn't I be the one offering you a drink?"

"Okay. Get me a drink. I'll take a dry martini with orange bitters and a lemon twist. Olives will do if you don't have lemons. I prefer it in a chilled glass. You can probably chill the glass in the ice bucket."

There it was. I smiled. She was damn cute when she wanted to disarm me. She didn't have to try this hard; she already floored me.

I shrugged off my jacket. As we headed to the kitchen, I noticed something weird about Raven's outfit. Her dress had a back pocket, which seemed fashion-forward even by Raven's standards. The odd thing was the pepper spray peeking out. I shook my head at her attempt while casually retrieving the pepper spray to stash it away.

Unable to keep my eyes off her, I fumbled around the liquor cabinet for martini glasses. I doubted my present ability to use a cocktail shaker to make anything resembling a martini. Then I spied a bottle of Malbec on the shelf. It was Raven's favorite, so I offered it to her.

Our fingers touched as I extended the wine glass, shooting a familiar zing through my system. I momentarily stopped breathing; the intensity of the brief contact was like a high-voltage shock.

This girl—scratch that, this woman—was the only thing that could affect me. She was an anomaly.

"When did you get back to New York?" I asked apprehensively.

"A week ago," Raven lied. She had been back for months but had been avoiding me. I disregarded the familiar irritation rising with her deceit and continued asking more questions.

She told me about her work and finally disclosed the reason for her return.

"With the pandemic, you can't work a part-time job," I assessed. "So, you'll stay here. We're all camping out here as well."

"I'm glad that's settled." Raven nodded, putting her wine glass down. "I wish I could stay and catch up, but I have to unpack. Thank you for the drink."

What the fuck.

She wasn't going to address the situation with Reid? Instead, Raven was making a fast exit. The kind of anger only Raven could raise bubbled to the surface. It was mixing into a volatile concoction inside me.

Putting my wine glass down, I charged after her. Before she sensed my presence, I lifted her from behind. Raven tensed in shock and let out a belated scream. It was no match for my fury.

“You think you can waltz in here after four years and give me the fucking cold shoulder?” I growled as I walked with her in my arms. “You didn’t think I knew you moved back months ago and have been avoiding me? What the fuck, Raven!”

“What the fuck are you doing?” she shouted back. “I swear to God, if you so much as touch me, I’ll go to the police. I’ll tell our families. I’ll tell everybody. I’m not letting you get away with this shit anymore.”

She should know better by now.

“Do it.”

“What?”

“Do. It. Do all those things. When will you understand? I don’t fucking care.”

Raven appeared bewildered by my declaration, though I could hardly focus on it. Today, one way or the other, our families would find out about us.

I walked to my room with a struggling Raven in my arm and crashed onto the bed. Raven made her case, using reason to talk me out of this. Not going to happen. Ignoring her hits and verbal abuse, I leaned to kiss her. My heart was about to burst open. I kissed her frantically while my body vibrated. Nothing had felt this good—this right—and I could barely draw ragged breaths, hungry for more.

I pulled her dress up and tugged her underwear down. I pinned her wrists to her stomach, pushing down to keep her locked.

“Milo, listen to me,” she tried her futile attempts, though I barely heard her over the roaring in my ear. “I’ve known you my whole life. You’re a good man. You know this is wrong. Please don’t do this.”

Resting my forehead against hers, I groaned, “Rave, I thought about you every single day, every hour, every fucking second. I can’t stop now. Not when you’re here in front of me.”

“Please just stop, and I’ll forget this happened.”

Never. “You will never forget this happened, and you will never forget me. I won’t let you.”

I trailed kisses along her neck, trembling for an ounce of control to slow down, and could only return to her lips for more.

I dropped down, my face landing on her pussy. With my free hand, I slipped two fingers inside her and pressed my tongue on her clit. I pumped my fingers, keeping up the torturous friction of my tongue.

Within minutes, sopping wetness met my tongue as her cunt squeezed tightly around my fingers. I released Raven’s hands. If she didn’t want me, now was her chance. I wasn’t holding her hostage any longer.

“Oh, God,” she cried as her fingers settled into my hair. Raven set off with a catastrophic peak while I fumbled with my zipper. I swapped out my tongue on her clit with my fingers and then exchanged it with the head of my cock. Rubbing my dick against her sensitive spot, I extended her orgasm.

Her shriek was mute as she could hardly voice the ecstasy written on her face. My heart was beating wildly at her expression, fucking erotic as shit.

I took my time to enter her, watching her beautiful face scrunched up in pleasure. Years of wanting this, I wanted to savor every second.

Shock registered when I pushed my cock to the hilt and shook for control.

Perfect. Bliss.

A moment of true happiness.

I was a panting and growling mess, but I resisted the urge to thrust until she was with me. Slowly, I found a rhythm, taking my time to revel in her. She was in my veins, under my skin. I was consumed by her, but Raven’s orgasm had subsided, and so had her lust.

She was a blank slate. Expressionless. Icy. Freezing me out.

Familiar anger surged at her rejection, ruining a perfect moment like this. I had given her everything good inside me; all she had done was put up barriers. Moving slowly, I dropped kisses the way she liked before sucking on her neck. I twirled my tongue around a sensitive spot. Nothing.

There was only one thing that might get her attention. Raven hated when I was rough with her breasts.

I pulled down Raven's dress, bunching it around her midsection. Grabbing onto one of the cups of her bra, I yanked it to the side. My tongue swiped over her breasts, licking her nipple, the sensitive tip peaking under my attention. It was pink and susceptible to my taking. I took the tip between my teeth, slightly clamping down.

Raven stared at the ceiling. Frozen. Desensitized.

I inwardly shook away my anger. Losing control wasn't going to work in my favor. It was what got me into this mess.

Changing course, I licked her warm skin. I could never get enough of that taste of vanilla. Starting from her breast, I licked my way to her neck and sucked.

Raven relaxed enough to moan, and soon her moans matched my panting. My attempts at control were useless against the sight of her tits jiggling as I fucked her nice and slow. And right as Raven arched her back, I lost it.

"That's it, baby. Come with me."

I pounded into her until finding my release, waiting to hear Raven go off. While she satiated and motionless, I undressed Raven entirely to roam her naked body.

"I missed you so damn much," I murmured in her hair.

"And that justifies forcing yourself on me?" she haughtily retorted.

Her body shook, possibly from anger. Though Raven was angry with me, she was furious with herself. Raven hated that she'd never been able to

break our physical bond.

“Raven, I didn’t exactly force you. I let go of your hands while I was going down on you. You could have pushed me off. Instead, you grabbed onto my hair.”

Raven turned to face me as if she couldn’t believe the words coming out of my mouth. “Forcing me to climax doesn’t change what this is,” she spat through clenched teeth.

“No, but the fact you climaxed changes how you feel about it.”

“If you believe that, then why force me? To prove your dominance?”

“That wasn’t dominance,” I responded flatly. “That was assurance. You’ll never be able to break this between us. I needed you to know before you did something stupid.”

Yes. I was her worst nightmare, but despite my depravities, this was about connecting with her, not just sex. I needed her physical reactions to continue. Insignificant as it may be, she did have some control in that regard.

Raven wore a blank look, checking out. That look indicated she had slipped into her world, where no one else could reach her. Raven was formulating a plan to get away from me.

Not going to happen.

I tried to distract Raven with banter, but it was futile.

Finally, she jerked free from my hold. I let her go only because it was time. I received the long-awaited text from Mia. A text that was supposed to justify the awful means.

As I put on a pair of shorts, Raven wrapped herself in a bedsheet and fumbled with her clothes. She was always put together, so it was cute when she was flustered. My amusement irritated her further, and she turned on her heels, heading toward the door.

Holding on to the doorknob, Raven pulled the door open with full force. I stood, knowing full well what awaited us on the other side of the door—no time like the present to finally rip off this Band-Aid. We were going to face the music. Together.



Raven

I stared blankly at the six most important figures of my life standing before me and was aware of the one unimportant figure next to me—the cause of this awful predicament.

I stood at the door leading into Milo's room. We just had sex. To be precise, he forced himself on me. I fought at first but stopped midway through, like always, making this situation more hateful.

When we were done, I swung the door open to make my grand exit. As soon as I opened the door, I came face-to-face with my parents, Milo's parents, Mia, and Reid. I had nothing but a bedsheet wrapped around my body. Milo managed to put on gym shorts before joining me at the doorway, and his filthy arms were around my shoulders as we faced off with our entire family.

This was bad.

This was so bad.

I could hardly form a word, which was alright because neither could anyone else. Six pairs of eyes were glued to our near-naked state, stunned into silence—everyone except Milo.

"We didn't mean for you guys to find out like this," Milo started calmly. "I'm sure you're confused."

We?

“Please wait for us downstairs,” Milo continued. “We’d like to talk to the whole family and address your concerns. Raven and I just need a few minutes to get ourselves together.”

Milo was a natural-born leader. He could easily assert himself without being forceful. Everyone except Reid trusted his judgment and obeyed his orders without argument, including our parents. However, despite Milo’s request, no one moved.

I silently begged them to comply. I’d much rather be locked in that room with Milo again than be out here facing them. I wanted all this to go away.

The guilt was written on my face. I couldn’t make eye contact with anyone, but I watched Reid out of the corner of my eye. His face was turned away, looking at the wall. If only I could read his expression. Or better yet, if only I could turn back time.

Why the hell were they in front of Milo’s room anyway?

I had to explain, but I had no idea where to begin.

Uncle Reese was the first to break the silence. “Come on, everyone. Let’s go downstairs and give the kids some privacy. I’m sure there’s a simple explanation—”

“Simple explanation?” my father’s voice boomed. “Reese, your son is standing half-naked with my daughter. I mean, look at them.” He disgustedly motioned toward us. Mortified, I could barely meet Dad’s eyes and kept my head down.

“I’m aware, John,” Uncle Reese spoke calmly. “I’m sure they’d both like to have the opportunity to explain—”

“Opportunity to explain what?” Dad cut off Uncle Reese again. “My daughter’s not some tramp meant to keep your horny son entertained.”

“Now, wait a minute, John,” Tessa chimed in. “I understand you’re upset, but there’s no need for name-calling.”

“Uncle John,” Milo said coolly. “I don’t see Raven that way. I’m sorry you had to find out this way, but I might as well be honest with you. I love her.”

Someone had just stabbed my heart with an ice pick. There was a freezing effect spreading throughout my body. All I could do was watch how this played out.

Milo’s confession seemingly had the same effect on everyone else. It was entirely noiseless as the words echoed through the hallway.

“How long has this been going on?” Theresa finally broke the silence.

“We’ll explain everything and answer your questions,” Milo said politely now that he had defended my honor. “We’ll have a serious conversation with the whole family, but not like this. We’ll get dressed and meet you downstairs, and in the meanwhile, if it helps to know, this isn’t a fling. I understand how serious this is. Give us a few minutes, and we’ll explain.”

My hands tightened around the bedsheet, aware of my naked state in front of my highly religious uncle and father. When would this nightmare end?

Mia noticed the misery on my face and came to the rescue. “Alright, guys. Let’s give them some privacy to get dressed and wait downstairs. It’ll be better if we can all sit down...” Mia trailed off as Reid spun on his heels and stormed off.

Everyone turned in his direction. Reid’s loud footsteps echoed as he stomped toward the staircase.

I stared for a moment until Milo’s hand landed on my naked shoulder, jolting me out of the lapse. Shrugging his hand off, I ran toward the staircase. Fully nude, with only a bedsheet wrapped around my body, I had no more shame left. I ran like a crazy woman to stop Reid—to somehow make him understand.

“Reid!” I screamed.

Reid didn’t stop as he hurried down the stairs and headed straight to the door. I followed, but the bedsheet was longer than my body. My foot

slipped on the silky edge trailing behind. I lost my footing and tumbled down the stairs, screaming at the top of my lungs.

“Shit, Raven.” Reid turned from the door to rush toward me.

There was a stark pain in my ass and legs. Did I fall?

There was a commotion. Forcing my eyes open, I found Milo running down the stairs. Reid tightened the bedsheet around me and collected me in his arms before lifting me.

“Fuck, Rave,” I heard Milo’s panicked voice and a comforting hand stroking my hair. My head throbbed, and I couldn’t move. “Here, let me carry her.”

“Back. Off,” Reid replied through clenched teeth.

“Reid, I don’t have time for your shit right now. This is your fucking fault. She wouldn’t have run after you if you hadn’t thrown a tantrum. I’ll put your face through the wall if anything happens to her.”

“Enough.” Uncle Reese’s usual calm tone was gone.

What was going on? I felt confused.

“Reid, take my daughter to her room,” I heard my mother speak. “Mia, go with him and put some clothes on Raven. Tessa, show me where your towels are. We probably need a few.”

Why?

My father’s unmistakable voice came next. “Milo, go to the guest room, grab my medical bag, and bring it to Raven’s room. I’m going to wash my hands and meet you there.”

“Shouldn’t we take her to the hospital?” Milo sounded incredulous.

“There are two doctors in this house, and we have enough medical supplies. It’s probably just a concussion. Let’s observe her first.”

I sensed being jostled before hitting a soft surface. Someone yanked and prodded at me, but despite my best efforts, I could hardly peel my eyes open.

“I’m here, Rave.” Comforting strokes on my hair and Reid’s distinct smell surrounded me. “Talk to me. I promise I’m not angry. None of that matters anymore. Nothing matters as long as you’re okay. Please be okay, Raven. For fuck’s sake, why isn’t she responding?”

I opened my mouth to respond, but I couldn’t find the strength, but that smell was comforting, reminding me of home.

“She might have a concussion,” a man’s voice spoke.

Reid’s comforting scent disappeared, replaced with a different presence. “Sweetie, can you look at this light? Try to follow it with your eyes.”

Someone blinded me with a light, flashing it right into my eyeballs. What the hell? Rude!

I couldn’t focus as more directions were thrown my way. I tried my best to listen but felt myself slowly slipping away and consumed by a dark hole.



When I opened my eyes, there was a throbbing in my head, and my vision was blurred. I felt confused. Disoriented.

Lying slightly on my side, I moved my hand to my head, though everything was moving in slow motion. As I tried to sit up, two sturdy hands grabbed my shoulders.

“Hey,” someone whispered in the dark, nudging me back to a soft pillow. “Don’t move. You need to rest.”

“Wha... Milo?”

“Yeah, baby. I’m right here.”

I didn’t understand. How could Milo be here?

“What? H-how are you...was...” It dawned on me something terrible had happened. I could tell from my slurred sentences that something was off. “Whaat’s... goin’ on?” I asked desperately.

“You fell,” he replied quietly. “Dad said you have a concussion. You need a lot of rest for the next few days. Go back to sleep.”

Nothing made sense, and I was confused. Nonetheless, I was relieved to see a familiar face during this confusing situation.

“Do you want some water?” he asked.

“It hurts,” I whined, moving my head to nod.

Milo grabbed a bottle from the bedside table and slipped something bitter into my mouth. My dry, chapped lips slurped as he held the bottle to my mouth.

“Come here.” Milo put away the empty bottle and collected me into his arms. My head met with his warm chest, the embrace assuring me it’d all be okay.



Milo

“Mom?” My eyes flew open to find Tessa’s face hovering over mine. “What time is it?”

“It’s almost six p.m. You should come downstairs for dinner.”

Fuck.

I fell asleep seated against the headboard of the bed. My neck was stiff as hell. Raven was lying sideways on a pillow, with her face tucked against my thigh.

“I’m not hungry,” I replied.

“Milo, you have to eat something. You haven’t left her side. You’re worrying over nothing,” Tessa gently chided. “She’s going to be okay. John and Reese both came to the same conclusion. It’s a mild concussion. She’s a little confused and just needs to sleep it off.”

She was right, but I still couldn’t leave Raven’s side. Hearing her fall down those stairs triggered the crippling panic I hadn’t experienced in years.

My business partners joke that I had turned soulless, lacking humanity and empathy. My panic attacks stopped when this accusation took root. I feigned concern at their observations, but I honestly couldn’t see it as an insult.

However, Raven still invoked feelings in me, albeit they only applied to her. That was why my paranoid mind kept conjuring up the worst. Dad assured me she’d be fine, but I needed evidence of her vitality and kept checking her pulse.

“She’ll be okay,” Tessa assured. “You know,” she spoke again, “we haven’t addressed the other issue.”

“Mom, I can’t do this right now. Not when she’s like this.” I motioned toward Raven.

“You said you loved Raven. You must understand why we’re concerned.”

“Why are you concerned?” I asked her curiously. “We’re both adults. Our dads are best friends. Our families love each other. Everyone should be happy if I want to be with Raven.”

“Milo, you used to be her guardian. Do you know how that looks to other people?”

“I don’t care what other people think. I have no intention of letting her go again.”

Tessa contemplated my words for a few minutes.

“Letting her go again?” She frowned. “M-Milo, exactly how long has this been going on? W-was there anything going on with you two when you

were her guardian?”

My silence was her answer.

“Milo,” she warned quietly, “please tell me you didn’t have sex with her while she was underage.”

When I still didn’t respond, realization dawned on her.

“Jesus, Milo,” she gasped in shock. “How could you be so stupid? You’re supposed to be the responsible one.” She started pacing the room. “John is going to kill you,” she stopped abruptly to announce. “For God’s sake, he could press charges for statutory rape. What were you thinking?”

Uncle John couldn’t press charges, but I didn’t bother explaining to Tessa. I simply shrugged. “I don’t care what Uncle John does.”

Tessa stared at me with a blank look. “He loves her. You know that he does.”

“Uncle John doesn’t get to play the doting, overprotective father. He left her for years.”

“I wasn’t talking about John,” she said quietly.

I know what she was insinuating, but it didn’t change anything. “Reid will get over it.”

“When Reid and Raven were young, we used to tell them they’d end up marrying each other one day. We used to plan their future wedding.” Tessa crossed her arms and stood tall in front of me. “I don’t know if Reid stopped believing that. We all saw his face when he saw you two together. Reid won’t get over this. I’m his mother. I know him.”

I stood to level with Tessa, finally displaying my irritation.

“Please don’t tell me how you know things because you’re our mother. I was more of a parent to Reid than you were. As far as I’m concerned, I’ve paid my dues. My only concern is moving forward in my life with Raven. So, you see, Reid will get over it.”

Life might have hardened me, but it didn't make me forget my responsibilities. I might not be involved in this family's day-to-day anymore, but I still paid their bills. Tessa sure as hell didn't deserve to use her 'mother card' against me.

"You're right," Tessa quietly agreed. "I'm sorry. We ask a lot of you, but you never complain. You always step up to the plate, and I take that for granted. Of course, it makes sense you and Raven want to be together. Reid will understand. I'll talk to him myself—" Tessa stopped short when the door creaked open with Uncle John peeking inside.

"I was just leaving," Tessa mumbled, squeezing my shoulder firmly. She nodded at Uncle John before walking out.

I nodded in greeting as well, though he ignored me.

Uncle John and I had shared a good relationship until now. He was notoriously religious. Since catching Raven and me in the act, he wouldn't look in my direction.

Uncle John and Theressa had moved back to the USA shortly after Raven. They were wracked with guilt over some drunk emails they had sent, claiming to never want Raven. They were Team Raven all the way, something that would've been helpful years ago but was plain annoying now.

Uncle John took Raven's vitals while clearing his throat to address me. "She's dehydrated. Has she been getting fluids? Did she eat anything today?"

"She woke up earlier for a few spoonfuls of soup. I stocked up on water and coconut water." I nodded toward the mini-fridge I had moved into her room.

"Good. She needs to eat more before taking the anti-inflammatory pills." He studied my unshaven and disheveled face, looking conflicted, before finally asking, "So, how long has this been going on with you and my daughter?"

“I’d rather we talk about this once your daughter is awake. Raven has the right to tell you herself.”

“Yet, she chose not to.”

“You guys haven’t always been close over the years,” I pointed out.

Uncle John closed his eyes. His worried face appeared disheartened, and I noticed the dark circles under his eyes. He had been genuinely concerned about Raven.

“I know,” he whispered. “I wasn’t a good father. She deserved better. I failed her, but you stepped in. You did more than Theresa or I did. I—I just didn’t see you two in that light.”

“I don’t know how it happened,” I stated sincerely. “But it did.”

“Why her? You used to be her guardian. Do you know how that looks to everyone? Milo, you’re a good-looking man. You’re successful and an eligible bachelor. Women chase after you. So, why does it have to be her?”

“It has to be her,” I gritted out through clenched teeth. “I always wanted to be with her, but I couldn’t because—” My eyes flipped up to meet his.

“Because of me,” Uncle John finished for me.

We awkwardly stared at the floor following his admission. The room was silent except for the sound of Raven’s soft breathing.

“You became her legal guardian because I asked you to take care of her,” Uncle John sighed. “You couldn’t be together after your guardianship ended, either, because there would have been too many allegations. I’m sorry,” he whispered hoarsely. “I didn’t know how you two felt about each other, but I respect you for not crossing that boundary with her back then. Is that why Raven left New York so abruptly; she was upset you couldn’t be together?”

The real reason why Raven moved to Paris without finishing her senior year was different from the official story provided to the parents. Raven told them she got accepted to the International Fashion Academy of Paris for a

remote internship. The adults raised their eyebrows, but no one questioned it since Theressa lived in Paris.

I kept my expression neutral instead of giving him a response.

“This is going to take some getting used to,” he said, unconvinced. He also sounded... understanding. “You two will face a lot of scrutiny from everyone we know, but if you stick it out, you will get through it together and come out stronger.”

“You’re serious?”

“I admit that I’m still shocked,” he spoke slowly. “However, you’re both adults, and I know you are a good man, Milo. I won’t hold back my blessing if you truly love my daughter. I just want her to be happy.”

I had been engrossed in Raven’s health and hadn’t considered what would happen once she was fully conscious. I told everyone I loved her, but they hadn’t questioned how Raven felt about me. Raven wouldn’t keep up with this ruse once she was lucid.

On the bright side, our families were finally on board. If Raven still sought their approval, the transition might not be so difficult.

Uncle John awkwardly hesitated again before speaking. “Umm...one more thing. Can you two sleep separately? You might be adults, but we’re still your parents. I’m uncomfortable with this arrangement.”

I smile agreeably without verbally committing. Sure, he might consider sleeping in his daughter’s room disrespectful. Neither of our dads approved of premarital sex. However, I paid the mortgage here. My house, my rules.

After answering more of my questions about Raven’s condition, Uncle John joined the others for dinner while I swapped out Raven’s old compressor for a cold, new one. The injured leg was healing rapidly. By tomorrow, she should be able to put weight on it.

Afterward, I woke Raven to give her pain medication. Raven complied before falling back to the pillow, eyes barely open.

I greedily stared at her. In her perplexity, mixed with the concussion and painkillers, Raven had forgotten to hate me.

Lifting the comforter, I collected her in my arms. Every time I held her, I stopped breathing, expecting words of protest, but nothing.

Raven stayed put before burying her face in my chest. She was fast asleep, allowing me to hold her close enough to let her smell linger. I stared at her face, covered in bruises. Her upper lip was puffy. Her leg was elevated on a pillow with a compressor wrapped around it.

I could objectively state her face busted open. Our family members cringed when they saw her after the fall. Even in this state, her face could capture my attention like nothing else. I could stare at her until I forgot to eat, drink, or sleep.

I wanted her.

I wanted her with every fiber of my being.

The familiar gnawing under my skin itched with sick urges to claim her. My mind warred with various rationality for my actions. After all, she'd hardly be this complacent once the drugs wore off, and this might be my only chance.

I had pushed the boundary with Raven many times, but surely, even I had my limits. This was a terrible idea, I reminded myself while I repositioned. I chided myself that I couldn't, not while she was on drugs. All the while, my ears perked to ensure no one else was upstairs and we'd remain uninterrupted.

One taste of her, and it all came rushing back. One taste, and I was hooked worse than before. Hopelessly addicted. I'd do anything for a fix and could barely control the motion as my face moved toward her mouth. Being with her reminded me of what I had missed out on for four years and why nothing compared. I couldn't breathe without this. If she had hoped for reprieve due to her state, she was sadly mistaken.

BONUS CHAPTER



Milo

Raven laid back on the pillow, eyes fluttering as I traced my fingers along her cheeks and jaw. She was so beautiful it hurt.

Lightly, I grazed her mouth, cheek, and jaw with my lips, nibbling on a spot that made her subconsciously groan. I gripped her waist tightly, eyes flaring at the sound of her vocalization. Turning sideways to ensure the door was still shut, I dug my nose against her pulse, unable to stop myself from nipping at the skin.

Raven reached out an arm and snaked it around my neck for support. “Mm.”

My whole body was set on fire, lips swooshing down against hers without holding back. Raven kissed me back in her stupor, squirming underneath me.

Slipping my hand between us, I caressed her over her shorts. She moaned louder, forcing me to slap a hand over her mouth to muffle the sound.

Once more, I glanced at the door. “Shh... baby, we have to be quiet. Your dad will retract his blessing if he hears us.”

She hummed in response, somewhere between conscious and unconscious. My grip on her mouth loosened.

Sliding past the fabric of her shorts, my fingers delved into her folds to be welcomed by sopping wetness. It was unexpected, making me grunt.

“That’s my girl,” I groaned, twirling my fingers around her juices while my thumb pressed down on her clit. I was met without resistance when I shoved two fingers inside her, the other hand moving roughly over her body.

“God,” Raven whimpered, biting her bottom lips, eyes barely open.

“Rave,” I hissed, tugging her tank top to expose her breasts.

My eyes dropped to her full breasts with creamy skin and rosy tips. I squeezed her bare breast appreciatively with one hand. Mouth dry, I swirled my tongue around her nipple, flicking it back and forth.

Her sensitive nipples stood to attention as Raven inadvertently shoved her breast further into my mouth. I moaned around her nipple, the gentle sucking turning vicious at the voluntary offering.

Raven’s lids flickered from the cruel treatment, gaze seeking me out with uncertainty. She glanced at her bare breasts. I sighed in relief when she only appeared perplexed rather than voicing objections. Perhaps she thought it was a dream.

“Milo?” she asked in a husky voice. “What are you—”

I sucked on her nipple, making her gasp. Taking as much of her breast into my mouth as possible, I fingered her, sliding in and out of her tight cunt.

Raven made an involuntary strangled noise in the back of her throat, making me growl. “You’re nice and wet.” She was downright soaked. I could hear the sloppy sounds my fingers made.

“Milo,” Raven whimpered, head rising off the pillow.

It broke my resolve.

Fuck it. She could be as loud as she wanted, respect for her father be damned.

“I-I...” Raven seemed to need immeasurable effort to speak, but her head moving from side to side spoke volumes.

“You are doing good, baby,” I praised, stretching her with a third finger, making her whimper. The first time we had sex since our reunion, she was too tight for my dick. All the while, I ran my tongue over her tip before moving on to the next breast. Raven arched her back, head knocking back.

I slipped my fingers out. Taking her left leg out first, I peeled her shorts off as Raven grudgingly squirmed for the missing contact.

Her impatience made me chuckle. “I have to be careful with your leg, baby,” I reminded. “But I’ll make it up to you.”

Discarding her shorts to the floor, I stretched out on my stomach, so my face was between her quivering thighs.

Raven glanced down at me, appearing scattered. Suddenly, her eyes widened as her wits returned.

Raven

I hated being touched right after moving to Paris, but curiosity sparked my determination to get over the discomfort. Why did people chase sex as their desired form of physical contact? I liked sex with Milo because it brought me into oblivion. An escape. Was everyone else also trying to reach oblivion or was it just about a physical release?

I started exploring the physical realm, hoping the same sense of escape and oblivion existed with another, not just Milo. Alas, it was never as mind-numbing or intense with anyone else. I had heard your first sexual experience defined your preferences. It was true in my case. After going through a string of lovers, I gave up on sex. It had been a couple of years, as it didn’t interest me anymore.

Until now.

Now all my senses were heightened, and every touch drove me crazy. My body buzzed, covered in goosebumps.

I didn't recall the last time I had a sex dream. They weren't usually this vivid, hot breath tickling my inner thighs. I heard a chuckle when I moaned.

"Fuck it. I don't care if everyone hears us. Be as loud as you want. Maybe they'll learn a thing or two from us."

Slowly, my eyes fluttered open, barely, to find a hazy figure between my thighs. I caught sight of dark brown hair, and it finally clicked. My leg was elevated on a pillow with Milo between my thighs.

Something was wrong. Something was off. I was high, but this wasn't a dream.

"We can't," I mumbled, voice barely audible.

"All I did was kiss you, and you reached for me," he replied. "You want me. Or at least, you want my mouth on you," he mused.

What the hell was going on?

I pushed against his shoulders, but my limp hands were ineffective. There was nothing I could do except watch him do whatever he wanted.

I lay motionless as Milo grabbed my thighs and slipped his tongue between my folds. He used two fingers to run a line between my folds before going back to sucking my clit.

My toes curled, my head knocking back on its own. My hips bucked forward to chase the friction and increase the speed. I arched up, pressing my core against his mouth. Trembling, I tried to stop myself from repeating the motion.

Before I knew it, I was pushing my sex into his mouth violently, fingers closing into his hair. No matter my fierceness, Milo kept up the gentle ministrations. He worked me torturously slow, running his tongue all over. My head rolled back, writhing under him desperately to get his tongue

where I needed it. His mouth lapped at my throbbing flesh, and a sensitive spot made tears run down my cheeks.

“Fuck,” I moaned, coming so slowly that it felt never-ending. My blurry vision wavered altogether, rendering me breathless.

When I resurfaced from my elation, Milo was pushing inside me. “Fuck,” he panted, lifting my non-injured leg to settle into the space. His eyes radiated with heat as his shallow breaths fanned my cheek.

“Milo, no. I can’t,” I groaned. My protests sounded pathetically weak in my current state, blissful from drugs and my orgasm.

“We can,” he growled.

Milo’s mouth came crashing down. Grabbing his face, I attempted to pry his mouth off. Milo entwined our hands in retaliation, pinning them on the mattress as he ground against me.

We came at the same time, with Milo holding me close. I slipped into that oblivion I sought but could never find otherwise.

CHAPTER 2



Raven

THE SUNLIGHT SWEEPED THROUGH THE WINDOW, INDICATING THE END OF THE torturous night. A whiplash of emotions hit me as hazy realizations came together like puzzle pieces.

Milo was draped over my body. How was Milo getting away with it while both of our dads were present? In the Sinclair home, couples didn't sleep together unless married.

The only conclusion—our parents had accepted this union.

The theory was hardly plausible, given the number of people we knew in this city. Dating your ex-legal guardian was a delightful scandal for those bored, rich folks.

There was only one reason why our families would be okay with this. The whole family depended on Milo. He was the primary breadwinner. Were they letting him have me as a consolation prize for his years of service to this family?

I had to get out of this mess, but I had already moved out of my place. My parents were broke, and so was I. Not to mention, I was immobile with an

injured leg and a foggy brain.

Experimenting with putting pressure on my wounded leg, I hopped out of the room to scour the house for Reid. He was nowhere to be found. Parking my butt on the living room sofa downstairs, I sent numerous apology texts to him instead.

No response.

All of my calls were also forwarded to voicemail.

According to the calendar on my phone, we had a family brunch scheduled for today. I should shower and dress but would rather wait until Milo left my room.

“How are you feeling, Rave?”

I looked up to find Milo strolling down the stairs. He was freshly showered, and his hair was still damp. Milo appeared calm and collected in blue jeans and a casual black T-shirt. Not a worry in the world.

Of course, he was going to pretend like everything was normal.

My eyes returned to my phone. “Just... recovering from brain damage,” I mumbled.

“Brain damage?” Milo chuckled. “Aren’t we being slightly melodramatic? A concussion is a brain injury at best.”

Instead of arguing over semantics, I asked the question that had been on the tip of my tongue since we were found out together. “Did you orchestrate the whole thing so our families would catch us together?” I asked straightforwardly.

Surely, even Milo wouldn’t stoop low enough to allow my religious father to catch us naked. There had to be some decency left in him.

“You have a vivid imagination,” Milo replied dryly.

It wasn’t a yes or a no.

Milo's actions before we got caught were despicable. He wanted to believe that my physical reaction was consent. Fine. We had sex plenty of times. I could pretend it was one of those times when we had a consensual relationship and chalk it off to charity.

The look on my religious father's face—who still believed me to be a virgin—left me humiliated, but okay, I could deal with that, too. The physical pain and limited mobility since falling were more than challenging, but whatever.

The only thing I couldn't get past was what the moment did to Reid.

"Whatever. Where's Reid? I have looked all over the house for him."

Milo's earlier lighthearted demeanor immediately vanished. "You should get dressed for brunch," he suggested stoically. "Don't worry about Reid."

Ignoring his laissez-faire attitude, I pressed, "Did he come by to see me after I fell?"

"Yes. He came by to see you while you were unconscious."

"Well, I'd like to see him post-unconsciousness."

"Who's stopping you?" Milo sneered.

"I can't find him anywhere."

Milo shrugged as if it was the least of his concerns.

With a deep breath, I stared at his face, which gave nothing away. Putting away our differences, I spoke with resignation. "Milo, I need to have a word with Reid. Will you please help me find him?"

Milo sighed. "Reid left the house and never came back. We don't know where he went."

My eyes snapped wide open. On cue, Milo scooted closer to sit next to me. When he spoke again, his tone lacked its earlier patronization. "Reid will be just fine. He's a big boy; you don't have to worry about him."

“Has anyone spoken to him?”

“No, but we’ve all called and texted him,” he explained. “Reid just needs some space.”

“Milo,” I said softly, “Reid has a pattern of drinking himself half to death. Do you remember the time Reid and I got into a fight? He drank so much that we found him passed out on the street. What if he does something equally stupid? Have you considered that?”

“I have,” Milo admitted. “I called everyone we know to see if they’ve heard from him. I sent someone to his dorm to check if he was there. There’s only so much I can do.”

“You can tell him we’re not together.” My eyes lit up with hope. “Reid is upset because he doesn’t want us together. We can tell everyone we played a bad prank. Everyone can text Reid to tell him what he saw wasn’t true—”

“I’m not going to do that,” he cut me off coolly.

The momentary sympathy Milo exercised was already in the rearview mirror. A flash of anger crossed his face. He reached for my arm, slowly flexing his fingers into my flesh until I took a sharp inhale.

“And while we are on the subject, we have some things to discuss. Exactly how long have you known about Reid’s feelings for you?”

I stopped short, realizing Milo knew the secret I had been harboring. It was the minor detail I planned to share on the day we reunited. In the end, I had lost my nerve.

“Did you sleep with him?” Milo managed to spit out, eyes darkening past recognition. Milo glared at me with rage. Madness. A storm that was about to obliterate everything in its path.

“W-What?” I stuttered, unable to help myself. Fear suddenly took precedence, rendering me unable to deny the allegations.

When I didn’t say more, Milo’s eyes reflected the same murderous rage as his tone. “Remember what I told you once? I’ll kill any fucker who touches

you. Do you want me to murder my brother?" Milo spoke the words evenly and without an ounce of emotion.

I had been paying attention since my return. Milo was the same but also starkly different. Though he remained polite, he had become unapproachable, disengaged, and dismissive. Milo always had a master poker face, but he wasn't masking his feelings anymore. I feared he had none left. He was genuinely devoid of emotions.

They said psychopaths were born, but sociopaths were made. Milo's lack of empathy, volatility, and impulsive tendencies wasn't inherent, pointing toward sociopathic behavior. However, his sociopathic tendencies surpassed typical impulsivity. Milo was unpredictable in an entirely new and dangerous way.

"M-Milo, I s-s-swear," I stuttered again. "We didn't sleep together. I swear it on Mia."

His face visibly relaxed for a millisecond before hardening once more. "Whatever was between you two, it's over," he declared flatly. "You are not to see him anymore."

"That's not possible. You know—"

Grabbing both of my arms, he shook me violently. "Do not fucking argue with me over this!"

I would have jumped in place, except his hold didn't allow me to go far. Milo's voice was trembling as if he had no more control left. He was unhinged. Now that he knew about Reid, any restraint he might have previously exercised was gone.

So, I didn't bother pressing the matter, and Milo took my silence as a concession.

Meanwhile, I eyed the staircase. "I should shower and change before brunch starts," I acknowledged his previous suggestion to change the topic.

Luckily, Milo took the bait. His eyes searched mine, finally giving me a curt nod. I remained perfectly still as he planted a soft kiss on my forehead.

Stunned by our exchange, I limped upstairs without looking back. As soon as I stepped inside my room, I swapped my clothes out for a bathrobe.

While the tub filled with hot water, I sat at the edge of my bed and typed an email addressed to Reid. Texts and calls were futile at this instant.

I had been so engrossed in the task I didn't realize how much time had passed, nor did I discern Milo's looming presence. At the first sign of a shadow lurking over me, I stopped typing. Quickly, I hit the lock button on my phone, but it was too late. His eyes were already on the screen.

"Everyone is downstairs now," Milo informed rigidly. "Your mom wants to know if they should wait for you to start brunch."

"No," I answered in a small voice, my eyes downcast. "They can start eating without me. I'll be down shortly."

Milo made no effort to move. I observed his agitated body language, along with the visibly stiff stance. Neither of us spoke, leaving the room thick with tension.

Unexpectedly, Milo leaned over to grab the phone out of my hand.

"Dude, what are you doing?" I yelped.

Milo didn't respond.

At least he didn't know my passcode and couldn't unlock the phone to read the email. I swiftly discovered that wasn't Milo's intention. Walking over to the window with my phone in hand, Milo opened it to let in the chilly winter air and nonchalantly threw it out of the second-story window.

What.

The.

Fuck.

While I was clueless about how to process his outrageous actions, I was knowledgeable enough to know when to cut my losses. Aware this was

about to escalate, I hobbled to the bathroom, as it was closer than my bedroom door.

Milo closed the window and charged me before I could lock the bathroom door. He pushed his way in and picked me up by the waist. I tried but failed to shriek. Milo held me up by one arm and slammed the door behind him before turning off the bathtub faucet. He spun me around and restrained me against the wall.

“I thought I had made myself clear,” he spat venom through his clenched teeth.

Panic engulfed me, and I shook with dread. I had fought with Milo before but was never speechless during our argument. I couldn’t utter a word, despite the strenuous effort I exercised. My neck broke out in a sweat, with ragged breaths coming out in spurts.

What the fuck was happening to me? Was this another side effect of the concussion?

A slight frown formed on Milo’s forehead as my heaving registered with him. He rubbed the sides of my body with both hands.

“Hey, it’s okay.” His tone changed instantaneously. “I didn’t mean to upset you, Rave, but... you just can’t talk to him anymore, okay?” With a hand wrapped around my middle, his other stroked my hair. “You don’t need him. You have me.”

Tears stung my eyes as my response died down in my throat. My breathing wouldn’t normalize, and I was convinced something worse was about to happen.

“It’s okay, baby. I’m not going to hurt you,” Milo assured, having guessed my thoughts. “Just talk to me.”

Bewildered, I involuntarily hiccupped, drawing in more tattered breaths.

As the minutes passed, Milo spoke again, adding a more comforting quality to his tone. “Don’t be scared, Rave. Talk to me. Has this happened before?”

For a moment, I thought Milo might snap at my prolonged silence. Last I saw him, Milo's impatience was prominent. However, he only stroked my hair, uncomplaining of my lack of responses. Milo repeatedly kissed my temple, soothing my inflamed nerves. I didn't fight his touch, grateful he didn't appear violent, angry, or threatening.

"I'm right here," he added. "Not going anywhere."

Shockingly, I was glad for his reassurance. This had never happened to me. I had no idea how to deal, and Milo knew a thing or two about anxiety.

"Just breathe," he instructed. "Take all the time you need. There's no rush."

I followed his instructions until my breaths evened out. Before, I used to be the one to calm him down. When had our roles reversed?

"Milo, what is happening to me?" I managed to croak at long last.

He blew out a sigh of relief upon hearing me speak. "Nothing, you're okay," he reassured. "Take another deep breath."

Every time I took a breath, I inhaled Milo's musky scent. He smelled like an anti-anxiety medication with one breath and horror with the next. Milo patiently calmed my heart rate, telling me to take deep breaths. With each mollifying word, the trembling eventually subsided, oxygen pouring freely into my lungs.

"Feel better?" he asked huskily.

I managed to nod. My hold on him tightened, grappling for an anchor to keep me grounded against whatever the fuck was happening. Milo didn't budge, either.

"Don't worry," he whispered. "Not going to leave you." Milo dropped feather-light kisses over my face while I stood complacent in his hold, with my mind in disarray. "Just let me kiss you, okay?" Keeping me in his tight embrace, Milo tilted his face at glacial speed until his lips met mine.

I was so relieved he wasn't angry—and I could speak again—that I obliged when his tongue invaded my mouth. Holding the side of my face firmly, he

stroked my tongue with his and groaned into my mouth. Mentally exhausted, I absentmindedly responded, eyes open. Blank.

I barely discerned when he slowly undid the knot holding my robe together. He roughly tugged at it to part the robe in the middle, freeing my breasts. My fingers dug into his chest as he kissed down the column of my neck.

In between kisses, Milo continued to comfort my lingering panic. "It's okay, baby," he repeated over and over.

By the time his hand trailed my skin and reached between my thighs, my brain was officially out of power. Evidence of my arousal smeared his fingers when Milo dipped into my core. I blindly hung onto his shirt while he stroked me, his length hardening against my thigh and rubbing relentlessly.

"Fuck, Rave. You're soaked, and I've barely touched you," he said hoarsely as his fingers ground against my trembling clit.

Arousal from panic was another shock to be digested, but I couldn't focus on it. I didn't want Milo to retreat into fury, and anything was better than what I had just experienced.

"You're drenched," he hissed agonizingly and mapped my slit with the wetness before sliding two fingers inside me. "I can feel your sweet little pussy pulsing."

Why was he saying these things? He used to barely speak during intimate moments.

I gasped when Milo moved his fingers, muscles contracting at the sensation. "Oh, God."

With his other hand combing through my hair, Milo pumped two fingers in and out of me. "Baby, you're close," he breathed.

He was right.

I looked down and caught myself unconsciously riding his fingers.

This was so wrong.

I stopped and opened my mouth to protest. To my horror, all that came out was a low moan. Milo shook at the sound as if hanging on by a thread.

“Not like this. I want you to come on my cock.” He pulled his fingers out of me. I hadn’t noticed Milo had undone his belt and pants. When?

He urgently grabbed the back of my thighs and maneuvered me up, pushing me against the wall once more. He grunted when the hard length prodding at my opening was met with minimal resistance. Milo sheathed himself deep inside me, pushing his hips forward and lodging himself to the hilt. I bit my bottom lip at the painful ache, feeling too full of him.

Milo shut his eyes, shuddering. “Fuck, you feel good.”

My muscles clenched around his cock as Milo paced his thrusts, balls slapping against me as my ass whacked against the bathroom wall. In my enraptured state, the remaining panic was far gone. I barely stifled my moans but could no longer do so when Milo’s mouth landed on one of my nipples. Lowering his face, his wet mouth sucked hard. His hand roamed my bare chest and squeezed my breast, making me gasp. The damp flesh on my chest glistened from his efforts, and I jolted when Milo drank and lapped with a never-ending desire.

“God, your pussy is fucking tight. Feels so good wrapped around me. Fuck.”

His guttural words only made me wetter. I was stimulated beyond belief as his hips flexed. I writhed as he went deeper, feeling him throb inside me.

Milo leaned back, eyes gleaming. “Come on my cock, baby. I need to feel you come. Need to feel you’re mine,” he said with another thrust.

My body let go before my mind did. “God,” I dug my nails into his shoulders, reverberating in his hold, lost in the sea of lust. The descent of my climax was followed by his as warm cum ran down my thighs, and Milo’s roar reached my ears.

By the time Milo pulled out, I couldn’t meet his eyes.

What the fuck just happened?

Milo managed to talk me down from panic to arousal to completion, all in the same breath. To wrap my mind around it was an impossible task.

Instead of placing me on my feet, Milo carried me to the tub and lowered me into the hot water. Stroking my hair, he asked, “Do you want me to stay?”

Finally able to look at him, I stared in disbelief and gave my head a shake.

“Okay, come downstairs after you’re done,” he said softly. With a final kiss on my temple, Milo strode out of the bathroom, shutting the door firmly behind. In turn, I took a few cleansing breaths as I retreated inside my head to my safe space.

In the end, the villain who caused the anxiety was also the one to alleviate the fear. It was ironic in every way.



While soaking in that tub, my determination to change my situation returned in full force. Having finally snapped out of the shock, I made my way downstairs.

Thankfully, the brunch itself was a welcome distraction from my internal turmoil. The food was delicious, and our dads told stories from their childhood. Their banter and teasing brought nostalgia for my childhood with the Sinclair siblings.

At some point, my parents reiterated their blessing about Milo and me being an official couple. I was cornered in front of a room full of people. Our families caught us in a precarious position. This wasn’t something I could come back from, especially with Milo’s declarations of love. As I’d realized, Milo was a lunatic I’d never be rid of.

Even a restraining order was useless. I couldn’t enforce a restraining order without calling the cops. I’d never press charges or put the Sinclairs through the misery of finding their golden boy in jail.

I had to leave my life behind to get away from him.

So, I had to approach this with caution. There was no point in convincing our families of our relationship status or asking Milo to tell them the truth. Once I figured out how to get out of this situation, I'd privately set the record straight with each family member.

Over the years, I had remained close to all the Sinclairs. Mia used to spend all her vacations with me. Uncle Reese and Tessa joined me at times. The entire family, sans Milo, came to Paris to celebrate Reid's and my twenty-first birthday last year.

However, one year, Milo banned the family from seeing me. Everyone chalked it up to us having a falling out. Milo's dictate came off as almost a call for allegiance. Even Uncle Reese didn't question the ludicrous "ban on Raven" because he would have come off as ungrateful if he'd argued.

Since his business took off, Milo took over the larger bills so Uncle Reese could move back home from the Cayman Islands. It allowed Uncle Reese to work part-time only at a private clinic and dedicate more time to his ignored daughter and depressed wife.

It sliced my heart open, but I refused to put the family in an awkward position by asking them to go against Milo's wishes. I understood their length of gratitude toward him.

Mia was the only Sinclair who fought to see me and overthrew Milo's ban. Her stubborn, sassy ass went toe to toe with him until he conceded.

Milo's business has been thriving over the last few years. Due to his schedule, Mia was often left alone at home during her school vacations. Despite Uncle Reese's presence, Milo realized the negative toll of exposing an on-and-off depressed Tessa to Mia around the clock. I was the only other adult he trusted with Mia's welfare, so he finally gave in.

At least he was on his best behavior during brunch. Everyone seemed relatively content as well. Even Tessa was happy. After all these years, seeing her this way was refreshing. Her on-and-off battle with depression

had been a two-decade-old fight, but the recent treatment had done wonders for her.

My parents were also in the same happy boat. After an hour of drinking, Dad declared we needed music to turn this brunch into a dance party. Dad cleared out a portion of the dining room, set up the Bluetooth speaker, and grabbed my mother for a dance. Mia and I giggled at his horrible dance moves and unsuccessful attempts to keep up with Mom.

Despite Reid's absence, I was surprised at this renewed sense of belonging and spent the remaining afternoon cramming in quality family time. Soon, I wandered into the kitchen, looking for a clean glass. I had merely opened the cabinet when I heard hysterical screaming from the dining room.

"What the fuck."

I turned toward the sound, limping my way back, only to find Tessa surrounded by a herd. My parents were distressed by the scene while Uncle Reese calmly took charge.

I exchanged a quick look with Milo and Mia, sharing an unspoken understanding.

None of our other drama mattered right now. Not Milo's lust-crazed sociopathic behavior. Not my strange panic from earlier. Not even the devastated, missing Sinclair.

The only thing that mattered was this scene in front of us before this family imploded.

CHAPTER 3

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ONE WEEK LATER



Raven

AN INCIDENT OCCURRED THAT ALTERED MY DYNAMICS WITH MILO.

A week ago, Tessa had a seizure during brunch, a side effect of her new anti-depressant pills. Since then, she has refused to take her medications. After one particularly grueling session with Tessa, the rest of us indulged in a lot of commiserating alcohol.

Of course, Milo took advantage of the situation.

The fucked-up part?

I went along after a few shots, only to experience a full-on night terror. My reactions afterward left Milo in shock, and a change has taken place in him since. Milo had only focused on Tessa-related issues, careful not to touch me. I would've considered it a fluke, but he had kept his hands to himself for the entire week, the longest he had gone while around me.

For too long, Milo had been the nightmare I couldn't shake. Though doubt would always remain on the back burner, there was suddenly hope for a brighter future. We had no choice but to live together, and as the only two people proactive with Tessa's care, we worked in close quarters. Since Milo

backed off, what began as a shared objective over Tessa's health concerns and other household-related responsibilities had morphed into a camaraderie of sorts.

While I was glad about our altered status quo, those weird night terrors still exercised their visitation rights. As a result, I couldn't sleep through the night any longer. So, I used the time productively by making breakfast for the family every morning. Besides Milo and Tessa, no one in this household knew how to cook, myself included. Breakfast was the only meal I could prepare—simple toast, fruits, yogurt, cereal—with my limited cooking skills.

Except, breakfast was called brunch today because it was the weekend, and we were serving alcohol. I had lined up two jugs of orange juice with bottles of cheap champagne.

Hallelujah.

As I set the table, I found Milo's business partners—Brandon, Jaci, and Alexa—charging toward me. They recently moved into the split level as their office building had shut down with everything going on. They needed all hands on deck to work around the clock without their in-house staff, and it was challenging to do so if they weren't physically together. Milo already used the split-level as his home office. It was also set up as a private apartment. Those three practically lived in the split-level back in the day, and they were close to the whole family, so it made sense for them to move in.

“Hi, Ms. Parisian, fancy pants!” exclaimed Alexa.

“Good Morning.” I smiled at her. “How are you?”

“Good.”

Milo joined us mid-conversation. He was in blue jeans and a white shirt today. Even his casual clothes were expensive ensembles, a get-up that had Alexa checking him out slyly. I couldn't blame the girl. It was a normal reaction where Milo was concerned. His physical attributes were hard to deny. At twenty-five, he looked more like a walking sex god than he did at

twenty-one. People stared whenever he walked into a room. His tall, sculpted body was commanding, especially with the ladies.

“Good morning.” Alexa was the first to greet him.

Milo gave her a brief nod before turning to me. “Morning, Rave.” He pecked me on the cheek, the type of exchange we used to share back in the day.

“Morning,” I responded as Milo acknowledged his friends.

“So, Rave,” Jaci drawled, “what’s on your agenda now that you’re back in New York?”

“Nothing much. I’ve been doing an internship for a family friend, Karen.”

“Karen?” Brandon frowned. “Isn’t Karen a bloodhound? I heard she doesn’t pay interns.”

Milo gave me a pointed look at the comment. “I know.” I surrendered with one hand up. “But I just wanted the experience.”

“Why?” Alexa tilted her face. “You’re fucking brilliant. You were what, sixteen or seventeen when your first dress was featured in a fashion show?”

“I was seventeen, but it only happened because the lead designer gave birth to me.” I pointed at Mom, whose silhouette was barely visible from where we were standing. She was browsing through magazines in the living room. “That’s not why,” Milo chimed in. “Theressa wouldn’t have featured it on her first show unless she knew the design would hit it out of the park.”

Brandon took me in a one-handed hug. He laughed and chided me at the same time. “God, Rave. You haven’t changed. You are brilliant, dude. Stop working for that vampire, Karen, before she sucks out your soul. Start your own line.”

“I might do that one day.” I smiled politely at Brandon, silently begging him to let go.

We needed peace in this house, and I had no interest in inciting chaos with everything else going on. Things had been civil between us since Milo

hadn't acted on his impulses. Those efforts sparked this new tranquility between us, but I didn't have to look up to feel Milo's raging eyes on us, his lighthearted mood dissipating.

As if on cue, Milo spoke, "Let's go to the kitchen. I'll help you bring everything to the table."

He nudged me with a hand on my lower back, and Brandon's arm fell off my shoulders. Milo was so smooth during the transaction that no one else noticed it.

Alexa followed us. "You should start your own business. Sell custom clothing. I have friends who regularly shell out hundreds of dollars for custom-made outfits."

I turned to find Brandon walking into the kitchen with us as well. "That's a great idea. Plus, this one"—he pointed his thumb at Alexa—"has bougie friends with a lot of money to spare. She can give you intros."

Alexa gave out an exasperated sigh. "I'll do way more than that," she huffed. "I'll front you the money if you want to start a business. You have no idea how good you are. Do you remember the dress you made me for my dad's fiftieth birthday?"

I did. I was only sixteen when Alexa begged me to make her a custom-made dress for her father's party.

"I ended up selling that dress for three hundred dollars. You can make ten to twelve dresses a month and pull in thousands. I can link you up with my girls, who like custom clothes. You should start a Shopify site."

"Whoa! Hold up, Sparky. You're going a million miles an hour." I was baffled, first by her sudden offer to help and also by the information dump. "Where's all this coming from?"

"Sorry," Alexa laughed. "It's the entrepreneurs in us. We can't help ourselves. We hate watching talent be stifled by working for someone else."

"Alexa, talented people work for you. Are your talented staff being stifled?"

“Yes.” all three of them replied in unison.

“You guys are ridiculous.” I shook my head as they told me stories from their work.

Milo and his partners created a finance app. The app rounded up change if you linked it to your charge card and invested the difference into stocks. While the rest stayed rooted in New York, Milo traveled to promote the app to investment bankers.

My bond with them had been rekindled since they moved in, though I couldn't help noticing Brandon's endless flirtation, throwing a friendly arm around my shoulders here and there. When we saw each other last, Brandon never showed interest in me, and I doubted those feelings had changed. I wouldn't care to reflect on his intentions, were his actions not causing friction. Milo's glare remained steadfast on Brandon, and twice, he casually removed Brandon's hand from me. Brandon pretended not to notice the jabs. He was a good-looking man, a charmer with the ladies. I doubted he was this oblivious. Whatever his reasons, thankfully, it didn't sour the mood or prevent getting reacquainted with old friends.

When the remaining Sinclair clan congregated downstairs, Milo grabbed the cereal boxes, and Alexa grabbed the toast to take to the dining room. While I cut up fresh fruit, Brandon stayed put, casually leaning against the kitchen counter.

“I hope Alexa didn't overwhelm you,” he said slowly. “We're just passionate entrepreneurs.”

“Oh.” I waved it off. “Not at all. It was sweet of her to offer, but I don't think I'm in the headspace to start my line right now. I wouldn't know where to begin.”

Brandon grabbed a jug of orange juice and pulled out two glasses. Uncorking one of the champagne bottles while barely making a pop, he poured it into two champagne flutes. Brandon handed me a mimosa, and we raised our glasses in cheers.

“That’s how we felt when the five... sorry, four,” he corrected himself, “of us started. We didn’t know where to begin. We were just a bunch of kids but look at us now.”

“Pray, tell. What’s this sudden interest in getting me to start a business?”

He shrugged. “All of us do micro-investments and prefer niche startups. We like investing in products that interest us, and Alexa likes fashion. She asked me to butter you up as she refuses to miss the opportunity to invest in you while you still suffer from low self-esteem and have no idea how talented you are. This way, she can lowball you to take a larger stake.”

I laughed. Brandon was adamant about making a business deal before breakfast, though I had no idea why Alexa was interested in going into business with me. “What stake? I haven’t done anything.”

“You will. And if you hire beautiful junior designers and models, maybe I’ll invest, too. I’ll do it for a smaller stake in exchange for the freedom of coming to your work to gawk.”

“Oh, my God.” I punched his shoulder. “You’re ridiculous. Maybe I’ll also hire hot male models, so Alexa gives up her shares in the business.”

“I don’t think Alexa will be so generous. She only has eyes for Milo.”

My eyes flipped up to meet Brandon’s. “Still?”

“Heart wants what it wants.” He lifted a shoulder casually. Brandon watched me closely as if assessing my reaction to this news.

“Wow.” I couldn’t help but marvel. “Whatever happened between them?”

Brandon blew out a long breath. His expression remained curious over my inquiry. “Alexa said they were friends with benefits for a while, but Milo lost interest in sex. She couldn’t entice him into it, and the more Milo moved on, the more she pined after him.”

Milo lost interest in sex!?

“If she’s been stuck on him for so long, there has to be a little bit more to it than that,” I gently pressed, genuinely curious about this topic.

Brandon's megawatt smile graced the room. "I guess the same could be said about him. He has been stuck on you for years. Is there more to that story?"

I whipped my head, unable to hide the surprise. I never took Brandon as the man in tune with other people's emotions.

"Don't look so surprised that I notice things." He laughed cheekily at my astonished face. When I didn't respond, Brandon's voice lost some of its previous amusement, changing to compassion. I knew at that moment Milo had a good friend in Brandon. "He's been pining over you for years."

"Pining?" I emphasized. "Milo doesn't pine. That's a dramatic choice of word."

"I don't think my word choice is dramatic enough," he replied tightly. "He kicked Asher out of our company just for kissing you. Asher worked his butt off. None of us wanted him gone, but Milo's the majority owner. He twisted our arms into it without giving us a reason. The girls never found out why, but I saw Milo at that party. I knew how it was going to end for Asher. He also threatened to kick us out if we didn't back him."

I lowered my eyes, remembering the night of Milo's twenty-first birthday party and how he beat Asher up. "I'm sorry. I know Ash is a good friend of yours."

"Asher landed on his feet. The point of the story is I've only seen Milo lose his shit over you. He didn't disclose what happened between you two, but I'm guessing it was bad, considering how he changed. He used to be a happy-go-lucky guy. Now he broods so much he might as well be a fucking serial killer."

I cracked a smile. Mia also commented on Milo's detached nature over the years. "Losing your shit isn't an indication of a healthy relationship," I pointed out.

"Sure, but it's fun for me to watch." Brandon's tone returned to its usual light-hearted self. "Do you notice how he keeps shoving my hands off you whenever I touch you?"

My mouth dropped open. “You ass. I knew you were flirting with me on purpose. Stop riling him up.”

“I can’t help myself.” Brandon laughed from deep within his chest. “Whenever I put my hands around your shoulders, all the veins on Milo’s forehead pop. He’s never been a reactive person, even before all his fucking broodings started. This is fun.”

I shook my head at Brandon, nursing my mimosa. I had set the glass on the kitchen counter when Mia joined us.

“Hello, Mia,” Brandon greeted her with a big smile.

“Hey.” She gave him a tight smile in return before hugging me. Since Tessa’s ordeal, Mia hadn’t been her usual bubbly self.

“How are you?” Brandon asked her kindly without any of his playfulness.

Mia gave him a nod to indicate she was okay.

I hated watching her in pain. Mia would forever be my baby sister, though she was practically a grown woman now, and we had developed a closer bond due to it.

After taking another sip of my mimosa, I passed the glass to Mia. She looked in dire need of it, and I sometimes let her drink under my supervision, just like Milo used to with us.

Soon, Milo and the girls returned to the kitchen. His gaze landed on Mia and the mimosa she was holding. “Who gave you that?”

Mia didn’t rat me out, but her eyes flickered at me for a second too long. I shrugged when Milo gave me a questioning look. “She told me she was twenty-one.”

Everyone fell into a fit of laughter. Even Milo smiled. “Is this what you let my baby sister do when I send her to Paris?”

“Well, I usually offer her heroin because alcohol has too many empty calories.” We were graced with another round of laughter and an exasperated eye roll from Milo.

“I’m glad you consider her dietary needs,” he retorted dryly.

“Mia prefers sticking to cocaine, which is better for suppressing your appetite. Plus, she doesn’t like needle marks. Kids nowadays,” I huffed at Mia dramatically.

Mia grinned, landing on the same wavelength as me. It was a game we used to play to tease Milo. “Needle marks aren’t sexy for all the Tinder hookups and one-night stands Raven lets me have.”

“Ugh.” Milo ran a hand over his face.

“But don’t worry. Raven took me to a Parisian brothel to be properly trained in the art of seduction. They said I was talented enough to be a courtesan.” Mia flipped her hair.

I sighed. “Alas, she didn’t make the cut. She failed the drug test because, you know... the cocaine.”

“Are you two done?” Milo asked, looking unamused.

“But you’ll be proud to know she has a callback for next year.” I nodded firmly.

“You’re both grounded. Go to your rooms.”

The laughter continued as we teased Milo further. Eventually, everyone left the kitchen, carrying various items to the dining table.

Alexa was the only one to linger behind. “So, did Brandon talk to you yet?”

After Brandon’s input, I was unsure how to take Alexa’s interest in starting a business with me. Mainly since word about Milo and me had spread.

“He did. And you’re positive about this?” I inquired.

“Of course. Didn’t Brandon tell you how I’m a ruthless businesswoman who’ll negotiate a larger stake, leaving you with only scraps?”

I burst out laughing. “Well, at least you’re honest about ripping me off.”

Alexa leaned in to bump my shoulder gently. “Call me the honest business mafia.”

Truthfully, I would love to work with Alexa. She was genuine and had always been a friend. So, I turned to Alexa and took a leap of faith. “You know what, Alexa? This sounds like a brilliant idea.”

We planned to collaborate later as we made our way to the dining room. I realized just how many things I had missed as Milo wordlessly brought random items from the kitchen to complete the setup on the table.

“Teamwork,” I heard someone giggle. My mother.

Sidetracked by Tessa’s ordeal, we had swept the topic of Milo and me under the rug for the time being. While my father still had concerns, Mom was beyond thrilled about the idea. She loved Milo.

Ignoring Mom, I sat beside Mia, who poked at her yogurt with a spoon absentmindedly. Out of the corner of my eye, I found Milo starting toward the empty chair on my other side. However, Brandon plopped down on it first, halting Milo in his tracks.

“Hello again, Rave.” I didn’t miss the delight in Brandon’s voice or the shit-eating grin plastered on his face. He tilted his head toward Mia. “So, Mia. Did you send in your college applications?”

“Not yet.” Mia sighed.

“I already sent in the applications for your top three picks, Mia,” I informed. She had been distracted as of late, and I didn’t want her to miss the deadline.

Our chitchat was cut short by the screeching of a chair dragged along the wooden floor. Milo placed the chair in the space between Brandon and me. He plopped down on it and casually pulled the placemat with Brandon’s place setting until the flatware and glassware sat in front of him.

I rolled my eyes.

Despite the male-testosterone-filled vibe, Milo eventually let go of his ego battle once our parents settled into their seats. However, two people noticed the odd exchange.

Alexa looked between Milo and me.

And Mia appeared frozen in place as she stared blankly at Milo.

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CHAPTER 4



Raven

OVER THE NEXT WEEK, ALEXA AND I KEPT AN ONGOING DIALOGUE ABOUT our new partnership, working diligently on the details. I was determined to change my remaining days in this house with three goals in mind.

To work hard on this new business opportunity with Alexa. Maybe save up enough to get a place for my parents and me.

To temporarily put Reid out of my mind. My parents were broke, Tessa was suffering, and my family needed me. I had to stay focused on them.

Finally, to compartmentalize away everything that had happened with Milo, so we could have a civil relationship while living together.

Milo didn't make it easy though.

He walked into my room and, without saying hello, barked an order at me, "We're going out." When I didn't immediately respond, Milo followed up with, "Dad said we need to increase your stamina. You've rested it enough. Time to see how it's doing. Let's go."

I had been limping around on my bad leg, the healing process moving frustratingly slow. Although it hadn't impacted my hearing or my manners.

“Hello, Raven. How are you? Would you like to go on a walk?” I reworded his suggestion to insert manners into his previous request.

Milo grinned. “Hello, Raven,” he mimicked with a crooked smile.

“Oh. Hi, Milo. I didn’t see you there,” I played along.

“How are you this fine afternoon?”

“I’m excellent. Thank you for asking. How about yourself?”

“I’m fine, too,” Milo said mildly, entertaining me. He nonchalantly plopped down on my bed and grabbed one of my pillows to hug it.

Everyone commented how the years of traveling had made Milo detached, but lately, I had noticed he was mellow, which was highly refreshing.

Milo peeked into my drawing book and pointed at my sketch. “What’s that?”

I sat cross-legged on the bed with my sketchbook in front of me. I looked down at the design I had been working on. “I don’t want to bore you.”

“I’m not bored. I asked because I find your work interesting.”

“I’ve always wanted to make a reversible dress. I don’t know how to go about it. Each side must be comfortable enough to feel good on the skin but also glamorous enough to wear out.”

Milo chuckled. “So, sort of like you?”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you mean by what do I mean? You’re glamorous and comfortable. You wear red bottom heels and Theresa Beckett Specials. Then you come home and strip down to three-dollar shorts and two-dollar tank tops,” Milo jested, pulling at the strap of my tank top.

“My tank top cost five dollars, thank you very much,” I deadpanned.

Milo laughed again, deep and genuine. My lips curved. I hadn’t heard his genuine laughter in years. It was nostalgic, flooding my mind with

memories from my childhood.

“Okay, big spender. How will you afford to make that dress after spending all five dollars on a tank top?”

“I plan to rob you while you sleep and then make a run for it.” I kept my eyes trained on my sketchbook, but I couldn’t help the smirk breaking out.

“You mean you’re going to make a limp for it with that crippled leg of yours?” Milo poked at my leg.

We looked at each other, then burst out laughing. It wasn’t awkward, but a belly-aching “haha” kind of laugh.

“I’ll slow you down before making a limp for it. Maybe I’ll knee you in the nuts before I rob you.”

“Ouch.” Milo grimaced, guarding his crotch. “Vile thoughts from such a respectable young lady.”

“I’m no lady. I’m depraved.”

“No, you’re cute.”

“Shut up,” I quipped.

He quirked an eyebrow. “Okay, vigilante. If you’re done with your crime spree, would you be so kind as to escort me on a walk? We can also get something to eat.”

I shrugged. “Sure, since you asked so nicely.” Milo looked at me quizzically as if my answer were unexpected. “What?”

“This is the first time you so easily agreed to do anything with me.”

“You said something about food. I’m hungry.”

“Hmm.” Milo cocked his head as if contemplating. “Guess I can feed you this once, but don’t get used to it. I don’t want you to get too comfortable.”

My brow shot up to my forehead. “Tell me you’ll at least spend five dollars on a meal for me.”

“I can’t afford all five dollars, but I’ll let you order from the dollar menu.”

“I don’t deserve such extravagance.”

“Nothing but the best for you. I’m going to grab my hoodie. Be right back.”

He abruptly reached over to give me a peck on the cheek.

I stared after Milo, who was humming while walking out of the room. He was chipper. Sweet. He was being fun and funny. These were characteristics he hadn’t displayed in years by everyone’s account.

Whatever the hell happened to this man?

Was that my influence? If our paths never crossed, could Milo have continued to be this person without the darkness consuming him?

I turned to a new page in my sketchbook and started drawing Milo. I wanted a record of the man I just saw. It had been so long since I saw this side of him.

I worked quickly to preserve him before he morphed into the other man I didn’t recognize.



Milo

“I don’t understand. Where are we?” Raven looked around in astonishment.

“We’re at my condo.” I gestured toward the spacious living room.

Raven spun in the middle of the room to take inventory of my apartment, giving nothing away with her expressions. Did she like it?

Maybe I should have made this place more presentable.

Shoving my hands into my pockets, I nervously watched her walk through the living room and onto the terrace. Having a terrace in New York was a luxury. This condo had a large one overlooking the city, but my place was

nothing fancy short of the excellent view, high-end building, and location. I traveled a lot for work, seldom returning to New York. When I did, my parents and Mia insisted I stay with them. So, I never decorated this place. However, I did come here earlier to set something up.

As Raven walked onto the terrace, her gaze landed on the arrangement in front. There was a table with dinner set for two.

“Do you remember that fusion restaurant we went to when you were younger?”

Raven scrunched her face. “Vaguely. We went to lots of restaurants when I was younger.”

“You waited for months for a reservation to this particular restaurant. You wanted to try all the desserts because a world-renowned pastry chef was making a guest appearance, but the wait time for dessert was ridiculous. Mia, Reid, and I were not in the mood to wait, so we left. You looked like you were ready to kill us.”

“I remember,” Raven smiled sadly at the distant memory. “I was so annoyed at you guys. I still can’t believe you wouldn’t wait ten minutes for dessert.”

I laughed at Raven’s version of the story. “Umm... I think you remember it incorrectly. It was more like a forty-five-minute wait for dessert.”

“Whatever.” Raven rolled her eyes but finally cracked a smile.

“Well, we have a meal made of desserts prepared by the same pastry chef.”

“What?” Raven blinked.

“The chef from that restaurant lives in New York now. I contacted him and asked if he would prepare some pastries for us. I had someone pick up the desserts and drop them off.”

Her head moved back and forth between the table and me, seeming confused. “What are we really doing here, Milo?” she asked quietly.

Instead of playing charades, I provided her with an honest answer. “We are here to have an open discussion. I hoped you’d feel more comfortable speaking if we were away from our family drama.”

Raven was often a little stuck in her head as a kid. Spacey. Dreamy. Creative. However, an incident occurred the other night, causing Raven to space entirely into an imaginary world.

It was the worst night of my life. It finally dawned on me how much my actions were affecting her.

My craving for a physical relationship stemmed from my need to solidify that Raven loved me. Our physical connection was tangible proof, but that need of mine had the opposite effect on her. It made Raven believe I was a monster out to hurt her.

“What would you like to talk about?” Raven’s voice remained apprehensive.

“Rave, we have to live in close quarters for the time being, and after that incident the other night, it’s clear things have to be different between us moving forward.”

“How so?”

“I can make an effort to change—”

“You are the one who once told me humans are incapable of change,” she interjected. “We’re nothing but a sum of our nature and nurture. We can both admit the nurture aspect has failed us miserably.” Raven motioned her hand between us. “As for nature, our neurotransmitters dictate our personalities. These inherent biological factors make up our foundation. At best, we can use medication and therapy to suppress what we truly are. So, how can you change?”

I had once told Raven my theory about how people never changed. Not only did she remember, but she was also using the argument against me. It didn’t mean I’d back down.

“By your reasoning, I’m still the same person underneath. The person you grew up with was the true version of my character.”

Raven opened her mouth, but I swiftly cut her off.

“Have you considered how I acted later in life wasn’t my true personality? It was temporarily suppressed due to extenuating circumstances.” I motioned my head toward her to indicate she was my extenuating circumstance. “Since we are stuck together anyway, determine who I truly am for yourself.” I fixed her with a firm look. “Meet me halfway. Why work so hard to reject me? I snap every time I feel like you are slipping away, and I already feel like I have no control around you—”

“But you do have control,” Raven argued. “You stopped. We hadn’t seen each other in years. You didn’t come near me—”

“Only because I had hoped you’d come back to me,” I argued.

“If you have hope, why the hell did you pull the same shit?”

“I had hope.” I closed my eyes to calm the escalating anger pulsing through my veins. “Past tense. When I found out about him, all hope vanished. You agreed to be in a relationship with my fucking brother. How could you do that, Rave?”

My words were laced with malice, halting Raven in place.

“You could’ve taken your revenge the way society and the law allowed,” I growled. “You could have thrown me in jail or told our families. I would’ve accepted either of those, but you did the one thing to cut me the deepest. So, congrats Rave. You got back at me. Are we even? Now, will you meet me halfway?”

Guilt flashed in Raven’s eyes for a change because she knew I was right. I put my life on hold while she planned to move on with my brother. Raven did the worst thing imaginable.

Did I believe it to be love between those two?

For Reid, yes.

For Raven, it was codependency, one that was the bane of my existence. Reid could twist her arm into a relationship because she couldn't risk losing their friendship.

"Milo," she said quietly, "nothing happened with Reid. He wanted more, and I promised to consider it. That's all."

My jaw shut tight at her renewed admission. Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath to reel in my temper. "Doesn't make it any better. I feel crazy fucking possessive over you, Rave. I realize you don't think I have the right, yet that's how it is. It was bad before you left; now, I can't tolerate it."

Raven appeared as if she had no idea how to react. I hadn't even disclosed my recurrent fantasy to tattoo MINE somewhere on her body, preferably her forehead. She had no idea of the extent of my unhealthy obsession.

Looking down at her interlaced fingers, Raven said, "Look, my life came to a standstill the day—" Her voice wavered before she dropped her gaze. "It doesn't matter. I wasn't trying to increase your misery, Milo. I only wanted to move forward with my life. Reid gave me hope for happiness."

"I can make you happy," I countered quietly. "I understand if you need more time to move forward. We can start slow. I'll do whatever it takes—"

"I want you to help my parents," Raven blurted.

Not exactly what I expected to hear.

"Okaaay," I started unsurely. "What would you like me to do for them?"

"My parents are struggling, and they have nowhere to go. I need assurance you're not going to kick them out of the house, no matter how things go between us."

I didn't miss a beat. "Done."

As usual, leave it to Raven to ask for something on behalf of someone else. I was aware of their financial challenges. Uncle John gave up his medical license and moved to Paris. Soon after his move, Theresa's business started suffering. They finally declared bankruptcy and accepted Dad's offer to

return to the USA. I didn't bother disclosing I had already decided on giving them a loan I didn't expect back.

"Thank you." Raven nodded in acknowledgment.

"I still have another question."

"Sure," she sighed.

"Do you hate me?"



Raven

"Hate?" I contemplated the word as it rolled off my tongue. I might have used the word hate when referring to Milo, but I had never applied it. When I loved, I loved unconditionally.

Although I wasn't a people pleaser, I was a Sinclair pleaser. I had always done everything in my power to make them happy. That's how things got so out of control with Milo.

Milo gave me lectures on various topics, including sexual conduct—when a woman said stop, a man had to stop. He emphasized there was no gray area with consent and prefaced I should knee boys in the balls if they got handsy.

That's why it was difficult to believe when Milo started coercing me into sex.

In the beginning, I thought Milo had made a terrible mistake. I deliberated that, driven by jealousy, he accidentally went too far. My new reality settled in when Milo kept at it once I physically responded. He couldn't understand it was filling me with self-hatred. The day Milo went too far, it pushed me over the edge. I couldn't ignore what was happening and left for Paris the next day.

After I left for Paris, Milo flew out to bring me back. There was unwavering determination in his voice—we belonged together, and anything different

was unnatural.

I promised Milo I would try to forgive him if he stayed away. I wanted us to eventually be a family again. However, Milo wanted the promise of reconciliation, along with my forgiveness. He wouldn't leave until I agreed, which I grudgingly did.

Hope. Hope was the only thing I could give to ensure he would stay away.

Yes. It was idiotic, but what else would've kept a crazed man at bay? I was seventeen and petrified of my guardian, who had legal rights over me. So, I gave him hope, never expecting his feelings to remain the same four years later.

Though our situation was complex, I never hated Milo, only his actions. However, I didn't hate the person in front of me working on finding a path to coexist.

"I don't know if hate is the right word." I unraveled my thoughts. "At most, I feel resentful."

"Resentful?" Milo asked curiously.

"If I'm honest, I resent that you have the whole nine yards." My attempt at forthrightness failed as bitterness warped my words. "You have a dream job. Perfect condo. Family. Adoration. Friends. It's difficult to endure that life is so easy for you after what happened between us. Even our families look at you like you are their savior."

Milo appeared astonished by my summary of his life. "It's not a good thing to be seen as a savior. It's a reminder of the same truth I had lived my whole life: the expectation for me to lessen the burden of others."

Milo's words gave me pause. That's how I always viewed him, too.

Despite his new sociopathic tendencies, Milo was a man of habit, which included being responsible and a caretaker. He resented this family after years of being tied down to them, yet Milo took care of them. Though he'd never openly admit it, he had a deep loathing for his mother. It vibrated

from his very essence. He resented Tessa for forcing him into a role he never wanted.

Nonetheless, after everything went downhill with Tessa, he was the first to step up to the plate while Uncle Reese checked out. As usual, everyone assumed Milo would carry the load. He never complained about it, so it was impossible to determine otherwise.

Did taking care of us have such a demonic influence?

“And life didn’t move on for me,” Milo said coolly, voice rising with agitation. “The last four years had been hell for me. I felt empty all the time. Food had no taste. Life had no meaning. It was just hollow nothingness. I was tired of slapping on a smile and walking around aimlessly.”

I tensed at Milo’s brutal honesty.

Milo took a few harsh breaths, quieting the bad memories. “I work all the time to support my family, but I also do it, so I won’t have a free moment to think about you. I avoid New York because this city feels empty without you. I don’t see my family because they remind me of you. I don’t stay at my condo because I bought it for you.”

“You did what?” I asked before the last word left his lips. Mia had also told me that Milo didn’t stay here, though I couldn’t understand why when I first walked into the condo. This place was my dream home. Perfect view. Perfect location. High ceilings with beautiful chandeliers. Absolutely gorgeous.

Milo’s eyes softened around the edges. “I bought this condo because you used to say Soho was the heart of New York, and the only good view of it was from above. I had hoped for this condo to be ours someday. The hope waned over the years, and I couldn’t look at it anymore.”

I blinked. Milo’s words were equivalent to a punch in the gut. His pained expression, worse.

“I didn’t know that,” I whispered, feeling at a loss following his confession.



Milo

Raven stared confoundedly, unsure how to process the information. Taking the opportunity, I prodded her gently. “Now that you do, how do we move forward?”

With a deep breath, Raven admitted, “By finding a middle ground. Look, Milo, I know how much you’re doing for the whole family, and I appreciate it. I—I need control over my life and my body. I need to feel safe. If you can give me those things, I-I’ll meet you halfway.”

I nodded at her acquiescence. It wasn’t the promise I wanted, but it was a start.

Raven stared ahead, gaze landing on the table. Without another word, she walked toward it. She was making a peace offering.

As soon as the shock wore off, I followed and pulled out her chair as Raven settled in. Rounding the table, I sat across from Raven. She casually opened the dessert box as if we hadn’t just discussed life-altering matters.



Raven

“Wow,” I said, feeling mesmerized. “This view is truly stunning.” The sky was clear, giving me an exquisitely panoramic view of the city from Milo’s terrace—a breathtaking reminder of grand New York.

“I thought you might like it.”

I nodded, transfixed by the sight. It seemed unreal, like a dream. The lack of sleep was probably fucking with my head, turning everything hazy. I dug my nails into my palm to wake myself up. Looking up, I found Milo watching the nail marks I left behind.

“What happened to you the other night?” Milo asked abruptly, eyes roaming the angry red scratches.

Milo was implying the night he endearingly referred to as the incident. I had an inkling that I had freaked him out.

“If we are going to be friends, can we start with an easier topic and work our way up?”

“Fine,” he conceded. “Why didn’t you think I’d find out about you moving back to New York?” Milo had that one stored and ready to go.

“Because I was discreet,” I said plainly. “Other than people at work, only Mia and Reid knew I had moved back. I asked them not to say anything. Stayed away from social media, too. Plus, Mia told me you barely returned to New York and were too busy to answer calls. I assumed you wouldn’t know about my move for a while.”

Milo grinned at my conniving plan. “You’re a smart girl.”

“How’d you find out I moved back?”

“From family members.”

“And how did you find out how Reid felt about me?”

“From family members,” he repeated.

“Ah. The cycle continues.”

“I pried it out of Mia.”

“So,” I said, glancing at Milo nervously in hopes of an honest answer, “you didn’t speak to Reid before we saw each other for the first time? Did you know when everyone was coming home the day our parents caught us together?”

I still had my suspicions that Milo had something to do with us getting caught naked by our families. I’d asked my parents about it, though Mom insisted Milo didn’t ask anyone to go to his room. He informed them there’d be a family meeting once everyone moved in. From her perspective,

it was a unanimous group decision to seek Milo out. I wanted to believe her, but something was off.

Milo said nothing, making it the second time he actively dodged the question. We sat in silence. When he spoke again, I almost jumped at the sudden sound of his voice. “We have this brilliant coder at our office, but no one wants to sit next to him because he doesn’t wear deodorant. I didn’t want to fire him for poor hygiene, so I promoted him as an excuse to give him a private office away from others. Now, I’m starting to think he is a genius.”

Growing up, we used to tease Milo about his old-man ways. In retaliation, Milo would tell dad jokes to embarrass us in public.

One time we went to a diner. At the end of the meal, our server came up to us.

“You wanna box for the leftovers?” our waitress had asked Milo.

“No, but I’ll wrestle you for them,” was Milo’s response.

Soon the jokes morphed into short stories. Milo would tell us dad jokes anytime we needed cheering up or if we were mad at him. It never worked on Reid, while Mia and I ate it up. We could never stay mad at Milo after one of his dad jokes, even if sometimes we were laughing at him rather than with him. This story was an example of the first.

My lips curved as Milo’s did the same, looking so damn sexy.

Sexy?

Where the hell did that come from?

I hadn’t thought of him in that way in years. I barely had the chance to reflect when Milo charged ahead with another terrible dad joke.

“There’s a woman at work who uses her time of the month to take time off. She’d go into such graphic details about her cramps that her male supervisor would get uncomfortable and give in. I’ve had enough experience with you and Mia. I have no shame walking into a grocery store

to buy tampons or using words like ‘heavy flow.’ So, I asked the supervisor to direct her to me in the future.”

“Then what happened?” I asked.

“I ended up giving her the time off.”

I gaped at Milo for a heartbeat, then burst out laughing. Loud, hearty laughter. The kind of laughter I hadn’t let out in years. The kind that had tears leaking out of my eyes. Days of suffocating, tense mood shifted into something familiar and lighthearted.

Once the laughter subsided, I asked, “So, tell me about your company. I don’t know much about it.”

Milo humored me by diving into the nitty-gritty details. He explained the most mundane aspects of his job with enthusiasm.

“You work a lot,” I stated the obvious.

“It comes with the territory of owning a business. The more I work, the better our profit margin.”

“Why do you need so much money?” I bit my tongue when the rude question slipped out. “I meant, you’re already so well off.”

Milo lifted a bored shoulder. “People think if you have money, then your money problems disappear. It isn’t true. The more money you have, the more expenses you accrue.”

“Expenses? Do you mean your bougie apartment or does the responsible Milo Sinclair secretly harbor expensive vices none of us simpletons know of? Drugs? High-class escorts?”

Milo gave me half a smile, but when he ran a hand through his long hair, I saw his eyes light up in amusement. He played along with a pretend exasperated voice. “Sure. Why not?”

“Crack? Heroin? What are the cool kids into nowadays?”

Milo tsked at me. “Cool kids? I never took you for one to have peer pressure sentiments. If all your friends jumped off a bridge, would you also jump off a bridge?”

“You tell me, Milo. All my friends just died jumping off a bridge, and now I’m pretty fucking depressed. So, maybe.”

Milo looked at me with his mouth wide open and burst out laughing. He only stopped to casually reach over and open my fist. I didn’t realize digging my nails into my palm again. It was a nervous habit I had picked up over the last few years.

Neither of us commented as he affectionately entangled our fingers. He held my hand in a surprisingly comfortable manner, just like he used to in the past.

“You know,” I said in a prying tone, “if you give me an answer, then I’ll stop coming up with these guesses. Just give me an example,” I pressed, feeling genuinely nosey at this point.

Milo assessed my words with a long, contemplative look while appearing... desolate. Milo’s tired, half-smile returned.

“Okay. For example, Mia and Reid’s tuition and Dad’s expenses. He’s not working full-time anymore, so I’m picking up more than usual. I had to make a healthy donation to get Tessa started on her clinical trial. It came highly recommended though it’s ineffective, which means I might have to pay for a new program. Plus, I’m giving a hefty loan to—” Milo cut himself off, realizing he had said too much.

“To my parents,” I finished the sentence with a slight, understanding nod.

I asked Milo if they could stay at the house, but I didn’t realize he had already offered to help them. This was much more than I had expected of him and more than they deserved.

It was frustrating to hear.

Nothing had changed despite the years. Everyone shamelessly exploited Milo. He spent his life taking care of this family. He studied and worked so

hard, but the struggle didn't end. When would this toxic-as-fuck family stop needing him?

Milo playfully poked me. "You look like someone just died. Don't worry, Rave. I'm still a wealthy man. It's not about the money. It's about—"

"The expectation for you to ease the burden of others?" I gave him a sad smile, feeling bitter on his behalf. "Milo," I started softly, "why are you doing this? It's not your responsibility."

"Rave," Milo said quietly, "no one asked me for this, but I wouldn't rest easy knowing I could help with their circumstance."

I looked away.

Despite our earlier heated conversation, my heart tore for Milo. He was right. I had forgotten, but he reminded me of who he indeed was. Milo would take care of this whole family until his dying breath, all without a complaint.

Milo smiled ominously in my direction. "Don't worry about that. Can we get back to our earlier discussion? I want to talk about what happened the other night."

"Pass," I said. What's his obsession with this topic?

"Raven," he warned in a silky tone.

Two could play at this game. "How old were you when you lost your virginity?" I asked a question of my own. No one dared to ask Milo about his sexual past. We used to hear about his conquests through the girls, never through Milo himself. He was a private person, but this was a two-way street if he wanted me to share.

Milo fixed me with his don't start with me look. It took everything not to roll my eyes. I saw the irritation flashing on his before he looked away.

"What's going on with your new business?" He changed the topic to neutral territory.

I rewarded him with a big smile and disclosed uploading my designs to a website so people could buy a custom outfit by merely sending in their measurements. “I also uploaded my work on Instagram,” I added. “It’s linked to the website Alexa helped me create.”

“That’s awesome, Rave.” Milo beamed with a proud look on his face.

On impulse, my heart skipped a beat. I craved that proud look on his face when I was younger, but it had a different impact this time.

After we finished, Milo cleared out the trash, brushing off my offer to help. Meanwhile, I inadvertently stole glances at him. My heart fluttered as I’d imagined it would in a movie. Or in a book. Or in song lyrics. Even my pussy skipped a beat. What the hell was happening?

When dusk set in, Milo grabbed my hand to pull me up to stand. We left his condo wordlessly, though the silence was comfortable, reminding me of the familiarity that remained despite the years apart.

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CHAPTER 5



Raven

THE DOOR TO MILO'S ROOM WAS SLIGHTLY AJAR. NONE OF THE "KIDS" IN the house knocked when entering each other's rooms. So, if you were indecent, your door better be shut and locked. If your door was slightly ajar, it was an open invitation.

Nonetheless, I peeked through the open door before making my way inside. I had been tasked with waking Milo... by Milo himself. He had a meeting he couldn't be late for, but he also put in a late night and was worried about sleeping through his alarm. Milo was sprawled under the covers, his unconscious body reflecting mental and physical exhaustion.

Despite the tiredness, he looked sexy as all hell.

It was odd.

I had scoffed at his superficial beauty before. I thought women were stupid to fall for his act. However, I have felt just as affected over the past couple of weeks. Perhaps more so than those silly women.

Maybe that's why I didn't have the heart to wake him yet. According to the clock, Milo could get away with sleeping for thirty more minutes, forty-five

maximum, if he didn't deem a shower necessary for a video meeting. I decided to wait until the last possible second to wake him.

While I ran out the clock, I took stock of the room. Milo was neat, but this room... It wasn't messy, but not to his usual standards—no doubt due to his hectic schedule.

I cleaned quietly and took his hamper to the laundry room to throw in a load. Twenty minutes had passed, and as predicted, Milo slept through his blaring alarm.

"Milo," I coaxed him gently, sitting beside him on the bed.

He barely moved. "Mmm."

I gave him a shake. "Get up, Milo."

"Was going on?" he groggily asked, his eyes still closed.

"I'm here to wake you up."

"For work?"

I stared at him sadly. "Unfortunately."

"Perks of being the boss is setting your hours," he mumbled.

"Yes," I agreed. "But you, the boss, set a meeting for which you're about to be late."

Milo opened his eyes, still looking hazy as hell and too fucking tired. He closed his eyes again. "Okay. Just two more minutes."

I let out a deep sigh. Clearly, his sleep and work schedule had caught up to him.

I pulled out my new phone, a gift from Milo. Actually, it wasn't a gift. He destroyed my old phone and replaced it with this one.

Swiping my phone screen to unlock it, I texted Alexa.

Rave: Good Morning. So, Milo has a meeting in twenty minutes.

I waited for her response. Alexa also worked late alongside Milo, so she might also be sleeping. All the same, I sent her one more text.

Rave: I was wondering if you know anything about this meeting.

A sigh of relief escaped my lips when my phone dinged.

Alexa: Morning. Of course. What's going on?

Rave: Any specific reason why Milo has to be there? I came in to wake him up, but he was exhausted. Wondering if someone else could cover for him.

Alexa: Any of us can take the meeting, but Milo is the one who scheduled it. We just got done about an hour ago. I usually don't mind covering for him, but honestly, I don't have the energy to get out of bed. Sorry, girl.

I frowned at Alexa's text. I felt bad for asking since she was just as sleep-deprived, but I couldn't bear waking Milo up, knowing he had gone to sleep an hour ago. I had already watched Milo work himself to death over the last few weeks.

Rave: I'll buy you lunch for a week.

Rave: I'll make you that couture outfit you wanted. The EXACT replica.

Milo would laugh at me if he were awake right now.

Rave: You know how we decided you get 6% royalty for every dress I sell? Make it 7%.

Alexa: You are a terrible negotiator. You should always wait for a response after your first offer before spewing out more.

Rave: Will you take the meeting or not?

Alexa: How can I say no when you twist my arm into it like that?

Rave: You are the best.

Alexa: No, I'm not. But now I understand why he always called you his Xanax. You just gave up part of your company so Milo can sleep through ONE meeting.

Alexa: We also need to have a serious discussion about your negotiation skills if we are to be business partners.

I laughed but put my phone away as Alexa sent more texts about my poor business skills. Reaching over, I turned off Milo's alarm, which he'd already snoozed twice.

I was about to rise when Milo felt the shift on the mattress and stirred. He grabbed my hand. "Stay," he mumbled hoarsely.

Milo used to call it magic when I stroked his hair and soothed away his anxiety. Hoping I had some magic left, I remained docile while playing with his hair.

Once, Milo was my worst enemy. Over the weeks, we regained our old friendship as I watched him work around the clock and take care of everyone else. I didn't know when, nor could I identify how, Milo had lodged himself deep inside me to the point my heart broke for him.

As I watched the beautiful man in front of me, a part of me died from sadness. A man burdened with so much from such a young age, with no end in sight.

It was unfair.

Despite the houseful of people and a world full of friends, Milo grew up lonelier than me. While he seemingly had a large family, his leadership role isolated him into a separate category. When I was young, I acknowledged these leadership traits, but as an adult, Milo had morphed from a figurehead to a partner with whom I shared an exclusive connection. We both had a deep-seated need to care for the people we loved. Whether it was Mia, Tessa, or Reid, we could never turn our backs on our family, though it was nice to have another person to help carry the load.

Entwining our hands, I squeezed him to let him know he wasn't alone any longer.



Raven

The staircases leading to the split level were constructed imperial-style, with two flights of walled-off stairs going in each direction.

Both staircases led to a foyer-type area. That's where Milo set up his home office. Four desks, office chairs, computers, phones, etc.

If you took a left at the bottom of the stairs, you'd find a door leading to the large, open main area. We used to throw parties there back in the day. If you took a right at the bottom of the stairs, you'd find a door to a small apartment where Milo's business partners were staying.

I stood at the top of those very staircases, trying to decide if I should make my descent.

Milo and I hadn't seen each other since this morning, which was abnormal since we ate every meal together. He missed our habitual lunch today. When it hit 10 p.m., I realized he never came by for dinner.

Unsure of the proper etiquette for home-office protocol, I hesitated at the top of the stairs. My decision was made when I heard Alexa's voice.

As I reached the bottom of the stairs, I was surprised to find a lively room. No one noticed my arrival, as all four desks faced away from the staircase. My focus zeroed in on one of the desks.

Milo sat in an office chair while Alexa stood beside him, leaning over his desk to review some paperwork. The exchange was friendly enough. I'd seen them work in close proximity before, but this scene hit a little too close to home.

He forgot to visit me because he was engrossed in Alexa.

I had barely shaken away the irrational thought when Alexa took Milo in a one-handed hug, pressing her breasts against him.

What. The. Fuck.

I wanted to gouge someone's eyes out. Rip their hair right out of their scalp. I wanted to claw the shit out of someone, and Alexa seemed like a good enough target for all those things. Before I could react, Brandon's booming voice reached my ears. "Raven, we missed you."

Milo and Alexa turned simultaneously, but I couldn't see their reactions. Brandon picked me up in a bear hug and twirled me around.

"Whoa!" I squealed in surprise. "Nice to see you, too, Brandon."

I levitated in the air until two firm hands gripped my waist and yanked me out of Brandon's grasp. My back hit a hard chest. I tilted my head to find Milo hovering over me, his glare steadfast on Brandon. Mine drifted back to Alexa.

"Tell me, Brandon, would you rather finish your workday and sleep peacefully in a warm bed or have me drag you outside so you can sleep in the cold?"

"I come in peace." Brandon smiled at Milo and made peace signs with both of his hands.

Alexa smiled sadly, watching Milo hold me tightly to his chest. I was swamped with guilt instinctively, knowing I was the reason for that look. Alexa couldn't control her feelings for Milo. She could only restrain her actions, which she did. Alexa had never been rude—nor had she mistreated me—despite Milo's not-so-little crush.

I tried to push off Milo, but his hold only tightened in response.

"Stop being so touchy, M," Brandon teased.

"It's been a shitty, fucking day. Don't test me."

"I was just excited to see Raven." Brandon gave him another cheeky response.

"Be less fucking excited," Milo said with his calm voice and stoic eyes. It was a look that dropped my stomach to the ground.

Brandon was out of his league with these jokes. He didn't realize he was playing with fire but would find out when Milo bashed his head in.

"I just came by to say hello. I didn't realize you guys were so busy." I pushed against Milo's chest to diffuse the situation. Brandon would lose his ammunition to provoke Milo if I wasn't in the same room.

Milo's hold on me tightened once more.

"Shit hit the fan today." Jaci twirled around in her revolving chair with her headset above her ears.

"Yeah, it's been insane. Milo locked us up in this basement." Brandon pouted. "I haven't seen the sun at all. Tell me, Rave. Do people still laugh out there?"

Despite myself, I let out a giggle. Milo scathed me with a look but reserved the harsher one for Brandon. "For fuck's sake, Brandon," he barked. "You're a part-owner of a company that's falling apart. Act like it." He finally let go of his hold to address the girls. "I'll be back later to go through the rest of it."

"See you guys." Brandon waved us off.

I lifted my hand to wave back, but Milo roughly grabbed it to entwine with his own, a silent warning against encouraging Brandon.

Milo walked us out of the split-level apartment. As soon as we were out of earshot, I faced him. "What's going on at work?"

"What do you mean?" He frowned, confused. "I texted you about what happened."

"Text?" I slapped my temple. It never crossed my mind to text him. Why would it? We lived in the same damn house. "Shit. I left my phone in my room. I get too distracted by it when I work."

"As Jaci said, shit hit the fan. I left the house first thing and just got back from the office. Our servers went down today."

I took in Milo's tired eyes and unshaven face. "Is everything okay?"

“We’re working on it,” he exhaled. “But it’ll have to be an all-nighter again.”

All-nighter with Alexa?

She was his business partner, so obviously, she’d be there. Alexa was also one of Milo’s best friends. He’d be confined with his beautiful, non-toxic friend during all hours of the night.

The thought was much more depressing than I could’ve imagined.

“Rave, did you hear my question?”

I didn’t. “Oh, sorry. I spaced. What’s up?”

“I asked if you’ve eaten yet?”

“No, I haven’t eaten.”

“Pizza?”

“Sounds great.” I tried to snap out of my weird funk. “I’m starving.”

“There’s a place a few blocks away that should still be open.”

I nodded, following him out of the house.



Milo

Raven and I grabbed a couple of slices of pizza from a local takeout and ate it on our walk home. Now that her hand was free, my eyes kept flickering to it. I was about to reach for it when she crossed her arms over her chest.

Raven had been unusually quiet tonight. She was walking next to me but was lost in her mind.

This was backward momentum. I had to bring out the big guns to keep her engaged. Already hating the topic I was about to propose, I tilted my head

in her direction.

“Do you still want to know about my sexual hist—”

“How many women have you been with?” Raven asked before I could formulate the question to completion. She didn’t miss a beat as if waiting for the opening. I smiled at her reflex. Locked, loaded, and ready to shoot. That’s my quick-witted girl.

“I expected something more creative, Rave,” I teased, hoping to avoid this specific question.

“Don’t you worry, I’m just getting started,” Raven retorted. “So, how many?”

This was why I hated talking about my sexual history. I specifically never discussed it so that it wouldn’t get back to Raven. She wouldn’t like any of my answers.

“I lost count a long time ago,” I said quickly, holding my breath for her reaction.

“How long ago?”

“When I was sixteen.”

Raven paused but shook away the information casually, not letting me see how it affected her. She fired the next question, “And how old were you when you lost your virginity?”

“Thirteen.” I was too embarrassed to make eye contact with her, so I stared straight ahead.

“Jesus!” Raven failed to keep the nonchalance in her voice, making me wince.

“Absentee parents and fast city kids,” I mumbled.

As if noticing my misery, Raven tried to diffuse the tension. She asked a creative question as promised. “Have you ever slept with a man?”

“No, Raven. I haven’t,” I patiently responded.

“Ever kissed a man?”

“No, Raven.” I give her another exasperated look.

“Have you had anal sex?”

I paused. “Yes.”

“Were you the pitcher or catcher?” Raven asked in an amused tone.

My lips twitched slightly. She was enjoying this a little too much, but I felt unruffled by this line of questioning. I slowly reached for her hand, untangling her crossed arms. If she planned to be ridiculous, she could hold my hand in exchange.

“What do you think?”

Raven studied my face. “Catcher, for sure.”

Sometimes, I couldn’t get enough of all the fucking shit this girl spewed. There was nothing like it in the world. “Whatever you say, Rave.”

“Have you had a threesome?” Raven didn’t so much as take a breath.

“Yes.”

“Did you like it?”

“It was the same as sex.” I shrugged. “Just add voyeurism and some waiting around time.”

“Would you do it again?”

“No,” I responded curtly, narrowing my eyes at the picture she was drawing.

“Why not?”

“Because the thought of sharing you makes me want to murder the person, boy or girl.”

“I didn’t suggest a threesome with me,” she deadpanned. “It was a hypothetical question.”

“Okay. Hypothetically, the thought of sharing you makes me want to murder the person, boy or girl. I don’t even like thinking of someone else touching you.”

“We’re not talking about me,” Raven retorted.

“If it has to do with my sexual future, we are talking about you,” I snapped.

Neither of us remarked on the comment, but I tightened my grip on her hand.

Raven needed assurance there could be more between us than sex. I had been giving that to her for weeks. As a result, something had been brewing between us. The wheels had turned in her head, and her feelings had changed. It started with sharing our meals, going on walks to test the range of motion of her injured leg, and working through our family drama. The transition was gradual, and neither of us caught on.

Now, Raven instinctively propped up her leg on my lap when we binge-watched our favorite shows on Netflix. I automatically reached for her hand when we walked anywhere. Except for sex and the label, we were together in every sense of the word, both in front of our families and in private. The term was “courting” or some other archaic version of dating.

I had never done this shit in my life. If it were anyone other than Raven, I never would’ve, either. So, I needed some answers to understand her mentality.

“Do I get to ask you a question as well?”

“I guess that’s fair,” she responded mildly. “But are you sure you want to ask about my sexual past? You mentioned your jealousy—”

I ground my teeth even. “No, Rave. I don’t want to know about your conquests in Paris. I’d have to kill the fuckers if you told me.” I wished I were kidding.

Raven ignored the sentiment. “What would you like to know?”

“Have you ever been in love?”

Raven stopped in her tracks to stare at me. She blinked a few times, then resumed walking without pulling her hand away.

“Yes,” she answered curtly, without offering any more information or explanation.

I desperately wanted to ask the dreaded follow-up question but chose not to. If the answer was anything different from the one I wanted, the repercussions might be too massive for both of us to recover from. I simply clenched and unclenched my jaw, hoping it wasn't him.

Instead, I asked, “What else would you like to know about my past sex life?”

“You never used to talk dirty, but I noticed you did the last few times...”

“Back then wasn't the right time to incorporate dirty talk into our sex life.”

“Why not?” Raven challenged.

“Because you were young and shy.”

“Did you talk dirty to Alexa?” The words spilled out so abruptly that it took her by surprise.

I stopped short. “If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were jealous,” I said in a low voice. Raven had never expressed jealousy or possessiveness before.

“Jealous?” Raven sounded caught off guard.

“It's okay if you are.” I meant it. I glanced to find Raven frowning, unsure how to react to her feelings. “Why do you want to know about what happened between us?”

Raven's smile faded. “Because I'm curious about the extent of your relationship with her,” she said in her matter-of-fact tone. “You do know

how Alexa feels about you, don't you?"

Honest. Direct. To the point. I felt apprehensive about the direction of this conversation. "I guess."

"Yet, you asked her to invest so I can start my business. You had her promote my designs to her contacts. Don't you think that hurt her feelings?"

I blinked.

I had no idea how to take this.

"She didn't play it cool," Raven explained. "New York is filled with talented people who are looking for investors. Alexa hadn't seen me in years but, within five minutes, jumped on the bandwagon to invest in me. It was easy to put two and two together."

Raven was talented. Extremely talented.

When she was younger, I'd stare at her designs and wonder how she came up with them. Over the years, she was only active on social media to post her designs. Seeing those designs made me feel connected to her, but a gift like hers often became unpaid talent. Venturing out without the proper capital and marketing was the main reason most small businesses failed.

Raven's business would thrive through Alexa's contacts. Alexa's rich friends had no problem ordering through Alexa's new company instead of whoever they had previously used. The credit went to Raven, but she needed financial backing and promotion to the right clientele. Raven wouldn't take my money, but she trusted Alexa, who had both the money and the connections. It didn't raise my standing on the moral scale to ask a woman half in love with me to invest in Raven, but Alexa knew to differentiate between personal and professional feelings.

"Alexa has the right contacts and doing this by yourself would've been tough." There was no point insulting Raven's intellect by denying the allegations. "Are you upset this was my idea, or are you upset because I asked Alexa to help you?"

Raven frowned. "I'm not upset. I just wanted to thank you."

I came to a screeching halt.

“Not for hurting your friend’s feelings,” she quickly clarified, “but for helping me achieve something better.” Raven smiled sweetly before getting back to business. “So, did you talk dirty to Alexa?”

I had always known Raven didn’t throw tantrums because she was slow to react. That didn’t mean she wouldn’t react. Consequently, I was cautious about giving in to her request. “How imperative is it for me to answer?”

“How imperative is it for me to trust you?” Raven retorted.

“Yes.” My response was almost immediate. “I spoke dirty to Alexa.”

“Thank you for being honest.”

I gave in, but I didn’t know her ability to process. She was so fucking stunted at times. It was like watching a child take their first emotional steps as they learned to walk the new realm they had recently discovered. “Rave, are you jealous of Alexa?”

“Yes,” her response was swift and definite. She added, “Yes, I believe I am.”

“You know, I wouldn’t be able to deal with it if the situation were reversed.”

I was jealous when someone breathed near Raven. If she were to work with someone she slept with... yeah... I’d never allow that. It was only fair to reciprocate.

“If you’re uncomfortable with Alexa, I can—”

“Milo, stop,” Raven cut me off. She looked up with a scowl tugging at her lips. “I’d never come between your friendships or work.”

Of course, she wouldn’t. Compassion and empathy ran deep for her. Raven always understood everyone else’s perspectives. After everything I had done, she was trying to understand me instead of writing me off.

Without dwelling on the past, Raven shot off her next question. “Have you ever had any STDs?”

“No.” I took out my house key as we approached the front door.

“When was the last time you took an STD test?” she asked curiously.

I contemplated for a moment as I mulled over the answer. “Four years ago.”

“What?” Raven exclaimed. “Four years is a long time. How do you know you’re clean?”

I knew of the thoughts running through that pretty little head of hers. I laughed at the way she cringed. “Trust me, Rave. I’m clean.”

“Even if you use a condom, they can break,” she protested. “Everyone thinks they’re invincible until they aren’t.”

“I don’t think I’m invincible.”

“Then why won’t you entertain the possibility of an STD?”

“Because there’s only been one person in the last five years, so unless you have an STD you’d like to report—”

Raven froze as I turned the lock to the main door, surprised by my revelation. Actually, surprised might not be the right word. Shocked. Speechless. Stunned.

I held the door open for her. She hesitated before stepping inside, quietly digesting the words while crossing the threshold into the living room. I had to return to the split level, but I walked Raven to her room.

“It’s been f-four years since we’ve seen each other. I-I... how do you expect me to believe that? I mean... how did you even remember what to do?”

I tilted my head toward her with a cocky grin. “It’s just like riding a bicycle.”

Raven stood with her mouth wide open. She suddenly blurted out, “You must have jacked off all the time.”

My chest rumbled with laughter at her cute little face. Oh, I did. All the fucking time, and to a particular dark-haired girl.

“I mean... I don’t understand. Why did you go so long? Nothing was going on between us...” She wavered off, unsure how to finish the sentence.

I lifted a shoulder at the thought. “I’ve already had all the experience in the world. Friends with benefits. Casual dating. No matter what I did, it was always an empty fuck. Once we got together, I realized how empty those fucks were. Sex simply felt hollow.”

Raven was quiet for so long that I opened my mouth to follow up. I stopped when she spoke in a nearly inaudible voice. “Was it really never about sex?”

The words jolted me.

Raven was the most beautiful thing I had seen. She was also the most creative person I had met. How she thought, observed, and her perspectives; it was unlike anyone else.

I loved those things about her, but none of those qualities were why I craved her in this insatiable way. It was because of the way she loved. She had this rare ability to love unconditionally. It didn’t matter if it was friendship love, romantic love, or familial love. When she loved someone, she loved with all her heart. Raven's love wasn’t dramatic, loud, or grand like mine. It was unexpressed and in the background. Yet, it was felt so vividly it shook me to my core.

Whenever I pulled an all-nighter, I found my room clean upon return, with my laundry neatly folded. I didn’t have to catch Raven in the act to know it was her. She spoke to my dad, volunteering to help him with his budget sheet to skim expenses. Suddenly, the bills I had paid were lower than the month prior. Whenever Raven was in my vicinity, my to-do list was significantly smaller. I had never once asked her for those things, nor had she taken credit.

Everyone regarded me as the caretaker, Raven included, though she was just as big of a caretaker. I was calm when she was around because she took

care of me. I needed her in the most integral sense of that word because there was only one person in this world who had shared my burden.

Given our history, I wasn't sure how to convince Raven it was never just about sex. "I know you don't believe me that it wasn't just about sex," I responded in a muted voice. "My actions never reflected the depth of my feelings. I never meant to hurt you..." I trailed off when I saw the look on her face.

Raven was still staring in disbelief. Her expression morphed into a look that muffled my voice, stealing the words from within me.



Raven

"My actions never reflected the depth of my feelings. I never meant to hurt you..." Milo's voice trailed off.

"I know you weren't trying to hurt me," I admitted. I had always known Milo's intention was never to hurt me. We spun out of control, and neither of us knew how to return from what had happened.

"What you just said... It's the most beautiful thing anyone has ever..." I took a deep breath, collected myself, and tried again. "That's the most beautiful thing you've said to me. It's the second time you have defined the word perfection."

When we started sleeping together, Milo was the same age as I was. At this stage of my life, I could navigate a relationship with someone like him. There were things I understood now that I didn't as a teenager, only receiving clarity after gaining some life experience.

I was more vocal now. Back then, I looked up to Milo but never thought someone like him could want me. I didn't know where we stood, nor did I dare ask. Milo never communicated if we were exclusive, let alone shared anything this profound.

I couldn't stop staring at him because this was how I had always wanted to be loved by someone. Until a few weeks ago, Milo's primary focus was lust. Milo said he stopped because our last encounter freaked him out. Given his admission, I hoped he understood how hard I was trying to believe his words. Because he was right; everyone else was an empty fuck in comparison. Looking back at my experiences—sex, dating, relationships—it was always empty.

I was trying because it was his love that made me.

I was trying despite his lust which broke me.



Milo

It was difficult to utter another word. Not when she looked at me in a little too familiar manner. A look that incited every emotion inside me. I had been craving it for years because she saw me as I was, filled to the brim with flaws, yet I was still her:

Whole.

Damn.

World.



Raven

What the fuck was happening? Why were we just staring at each other?

I couldn't breathe under his scrutiny. I was in some fog, where all I saw was him. For weeks, it felt like we were the only two people on this planet despite the ten others living in this house. It was as if he was my:

Whole.

Fucking.

World.

Fuck. Me.

When did this happen?



Milo

The sudden energy shift was palpable in the air. Raven's breathing was faster, and my heart was pounding against my rib cage.

She nervously fidgeted by her door... waiting. It was the universal end of the night kiss me signal. This was the first time Raven gave me an opening, and I wanted this more than I wanted oxygen, but my sight was on the end goal—Raven's unconditional love. Her love was so close I could almost close my grasp on it. I couldn't risk losing it forever due to a momentary relapse.

I had been researching trauma and its aftereffects. Raven's shaking, her night terrors, and her sudden reactive responses—it all indicated trauma. Despite all the therapists I had spoken to so far, there wasn't much else I could do unless she agreed to discuss it. It had to be her choice, but Raven refused to divulge it. She was looking at me with lust, but it was mixed with anxiety. It was an automatic response to someone who subconsciously terrified her. At times Raven was fine in my company. She was okay with me touching her and holding her. Other times, I walked on eggshells due to her instinctive reactions.

I forced her to eat every meal with me, though even our most distracted family members had noticed her weight loss. They had also noted the dark circles under her eyes. The nightmares, the lack of sleep. The twitchiness. It was all getting out of control.

Then there were the self-harming tendencies. I had to take away needles on two occasions while Raven was distractedly digging them into her fingers because I reached for her abruptly.

It destroyed me.

There was no fucking road map for this. No way to navigate through what could set her off except to watch her body language and assure her I was no longer a threat.

“It was never just sex,” I repeated to drill it into her brain. “It was our connection. After experiencing the real deal, the idea of anything less felt empty. Just the thought of someone else left me feeling dissatisfied.” Raven might be giving me the signal, but her apprehension remained. Instead of letting this heady moment get out of control, I cut the tension playfully. “It’s like being asked to be on a vegetarian diet when you are a strict carnivore.”

Raven laughed loudly, breaking our staring contest and the tension pulsing in the air. “Are you saying I’m a piece of meat?”

“You are Wagyu beef,” I confirmed, hiding my amusement. “When you are used to having Kobe, then asked to eat grass, it only leaves you hungrier.”

“Oh, my God. Stop comparing me to food. I’m getting hungry again.”

I chuckled and changed the topic. “Fine. Are we still on for tomorrow?”

The small frown on Raven’s forehead displayed her surprise at my attempt to end the night abruptly. “Yes,” she said awkwardly with a forced smile. “We can go whenever you wake up.”

“Okay. Good night.”

“Good night.” Raven stood still for a second longer, unsure if I was making a move.

I backed away first with a wave, cueing our most awkward goodnight to date.

CHAPTER 6



Milo

UNCLE JOHN ENCOURAGED RAVEN TO GO ON LONG WALKS TO IMPROVE HER range of motion since her physical recovery has been prolonged and painful. We were on a trail close to my condo for today's walk. As we reached the last stretch of the forty-five-minute walk, Raven's leg flamed up, and I suggested stopping by my condo to recover.

I laid her on the bed with pillows supporting her. This was the most silent we had been in each other's company in weeks.

Raven and I always shared a palpable sexual tension, but since last night, neither of us had been able to ignore the magnitude of the tension. Whenever I glanced at her, I wanted to corner her and start fucking her.

My reaction was elementary at best, especially since Raven wasn't faring well in this environment. Her injury and being in an enclosed space with her predator escalated her panic. Slight sweat trickled around Raven's hairline, though it was cold. It was coupled with random shaking and shortness of breath. Her leg was propped on a pillow, parted, and she looked vulnerable as fuck. Ready for the taking.

The last thing I could do was focus on her panic. Instead, in the true nature of her predator, I was focused on how long it had been.

Forty fucking days. I could go four years without sex, but forty fucking days in Raven's presence was impossible. I only lasted because of the horror flickering in her eyes the last time we were together, the god-forsaken incident. I needed to remind myself of it and take a cold shower.

"I'm going to take a shower. While I do that, I'd love your input on decorating this place."

"What would you like me to do?" Raven asked, wide-eyed.

My condo was bare, with minimum furnishing, and it desperately needed a paint job. I handed Raven the color swatch book from my desk.

"Why don't you pick a paint color? I already own the eggshell, white, and off-white paint buckets. Circle the one you like."

Raven was clueless about home decor. I bet she'd just stare at the swatches, trying to differentiate between the three. I tasked her with it anyways to distract her from her trepidation.



Raven

Milo handed me a big book of color swatches, asking me to choose between eggshells, white, and off-white.

Honestly, I couldn't differentiate between the three.

Paint colors were different from the color swatches fashion designers worked with. All three swatches looked white to me. Nonetheless, I circled one.

Something had shifted in my dynamic with Milo since last night. His words of admission were magical. I was beyond touched. We had been hanging

out for weeks, joking, and digging up memories, but those words added intimacy to our relationship.

You could practically cut the sexual tension between us with a knife.

However, Milo shut down after his proclamation. Today, he had barely spoken a word or looked my way.

I tried our usual jokes. Regular conversation. It was all met with a grunt, silence, and no eye contact. I had no idea how to break the ice.

The anti-inflammatory and the pain medication Milo gave me weren't helping either. The after-effect on an empty stomach was causing dizziness. But not enough to blur the visual in front of me.

Milo walked out of the bathroom with nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist. I pulled the covers over my face but could make out his wet body striding into the room through the opening.

This was the most naked I had seen him in years.

Yes, years.

Every time we had sex since my return, Milo was busy restraining me, and I was too busy fighting him off to take in his body.

My eyes trailed his solid back as he ransacked the closet. His broad shoulders, biceps, the contours of his back, all of it seemed larger than life.

Fuck, he was hot. That wasn't exactly news, but his physical beauty was blatantly staring me in the face. Something had changed between us. His looks affected me differently now than before.

Milo stared at his closet in seeming frustration. I didn't believe he stored any clothing here. He presumably came to the same conclusion since he pulled out the only available outfit—jeans and a flannel shirt.

Milo threw his sweat-soaked clothes into a hamper. In a quick move, he removed the towel from around his waist.

I didn't need a mirror to know my cheeks were turning a million shades of crimson.

I stared at his bare, shapely ass like a perverted peeping Tom until it was covered by a pair of jeans sans boxers. Milo turned my way to catch me in the act. He quirked an eyebrow at my blatant gawking. I should stop staring, except my eyes were fixated on his bare chest. How did I forget his washboard abs and the perfect V I had never seen on another man?

Look away, idiot, I chided myself.

My damn eyes refused to obey the command. Milo's expression remained guarded. He threw the flannel shirt and the used towel on the bed.

"I'm running a bath for you." He pointed his thumb toward the bathroom. "Uncle John said it'll help if we soak your leg. I have a shirt you can wear until I run a load of wash for our dirty clothes." He gave me a sheepish look. "I only have one towel, sorry."

"No worries," I replied easily. "I don't mind."

"Do you need help getting into the tub?"

I slowly rose from the bed. "Nope. I got it."

I made my way to the bathroom and closed the door to strip my clothes. I sank into the hot water and chuckled over how I shamelessly eye-fucked Milo.

Speaking of the devil, Milo walked in without looking my way. Wordlessly, he grabbed my dirty clothes off the floor and walked out, shutting the door behind him.

Was he washing my dirty underwear?

Oh, God.

I sank into the water in mortification.

When I finished my bath, I hobbled out of the tub and wrapped the towel around me, hyper-aware that this very towel was touching his dick and ass

not too long ago. I had hung my bra on the towel rack and was relieved Milo didn't take it for a wash. It was one of those sweat-resistant bras, though I didn't sweat much during our hike. After toweling off, I put the bra and Milo's flannel shirt on. At least the shirt went down to my upper thighs.

I found Milo in the kitchen, unboxing some takeout. He gave me a tight smile as I joined him at the table. He was still fucking shirtless, and I had no underwear on, hanging out half-naked without a soul in sight. The big, empty condo was making it more apparent. What was worse was Milo's refusal to speak as we dug into our meals.

This was unbearable.

Look. At. Me. I silently yelled in my head.

After things had changed between us, why was he suddenly acting like I was non-existent? For the first time since I had known Milo, I felt invisible.



Milo

Torment.

Torture.

Temptation. Sweet fucking temptation.

I was doing everything in my power not to look at Raven. Not to look at her wet, naked body underneath the shirt, barely reaching past her pussy. Her pussy that was bare since her underwear was in the damn wash.

Are you fucking kidding me?

Dad used to drag Mia and Reid to church every time he was off on a Sunday. He never bothered me with church because it was my day off if he took the kids. As a result, Mia and Reid believed in a higher power. Whereas Raven and I never found ourselves interested in theology.

The current situation might change my mind. Was this the universe telling me there was a God, and he was punishing me for my sins?

The amount of control this situation required was a joke. This was the most skin Raven had displayed in weeks, and the timing couldn't have been worse. We were in an empty apartment. No fucking family members. No friends. No buffers. Everything was exponentially sexual to the point of madness. She wasn't helping with her lusted-filled looks, either. If I didn't pick up on Raven's other reactions, I would have fucked the living daylights out of her by now.

However, I did see it. I came out of the bathroom to find Raven eye-fucking me while her trepidation remained. The sudden chills. Her gulps. I bet her heartbeat was rapid, too. Her body seemed to be in a constant fight or flight mode.

If she was fucking terrified of me and shook in reflex, why the fuck was she looking at me that way? Did she not realize the adverse effects I had on her?

This was insane. The prey was looking at the predator wantonly. Every impulse in my body screamed for my cock to be inside her. I needed to feel her pulsing around me. I needed it so badly everything was turning goddamn blurry and hazy. Ignoring these impulses until our clothes were dry seemed like an impossible task. I kept telling myself I could control it.

Of course, I could.

Maybe.

Probably not.

There was no one around. My depraved thoughts were scaring me. How must she feel?

My eyes landed on the hem of the shirt she wore. It was revealing too much of her legs. I trailed my eyes to catch sight of her cleavage despite the damn bra she put on.

No one should be this enticing. Raven was the reason why the word temptation was created. Because that's what she was, fucking temptation served on a platter. Hazel eyes. Perfect tits. Porcelain skin. A stupid shirt that barely reached her thighs.

This was absurd.

It was fucking torment to want something this much and be unable to act on it.

I needed air.

I rose from my chair and walked barefoot to the terrace without providing her an explanation. I didn't trust myself around Raven. The reality was—I'd probably lose control again. I couldn't be around her and not be with her in the way every instinct in my body craved. No one had ever felt this way around a girl, nor should they.

I stayed out on the terrace for as long as I could. When I finally returned, Raven was in my bedroom, sitting at the edge of my bed, looking at the swatch book.

This torture would never end. My nostrils flared the moment her vanilla smell hit my senses. I was so fucked, and so was she.



Raven

Milo had been taking refuge on the terrace to get away from me. Meanwhile, I grabbed the color swatch book and examined the colors to keep myself busy. I had barely opened it when Milo returned. He marched toward me before changing his intentions to pace the room like a maniac.

Neither of us had still spoken a damn word to the other. I couldn't take it for a minute longer. I'd rather walk back to the Upper West Side on a handicapped leg. It was only what, two hours? Worth it.

The less dramatic approach might be to simply call an Uber. I just couldn't think straight while he was fucking shirtless. If he refused to touch me, why the hell was he shirtless?

The sight kept riling me up. At this point, I considered giving Milo my shirt to cover him.

I couldn't remember the last time I felt this out of control. I was soaked between my thighs with no damn underwear on. I considered jumping him, but I had no idea how to make a move without an indication from him. Acting sexy had never come easy to me.

Milo stopped pacing and turned to face me. He had to know what I was thinking. Assuming it wasn't blatantly written across my forehead, it was obvious with my heated cheeks and the rapid rise and fall of my chest. He hadn't done a damn thing, but arousal around him had become an automated response.

The lining of his jeans made his intentions clear as well. His cock was about to burst out the seams. So, why was he running away and keeping his distance?

Do something! I screamed in my head.

How did I facilitate this? There wasn't a step-by-step guide to transition from a nonconsensual to a consensual sexual relationship for dummies.

Ultimately, my concerns were for nothing because Milo's facial expression changed. He had come to a decision that had lust written all over it. In a pure Milo move, he didn't wait for a second longer.

Milo strolled closer, dropped on the floor in front of me, grabbed both of my thighs, and yanked them apart. His eyes were on me. Milo was watching... waiting for my reaction.

I'd open my legs wider to show my acquiescence, but his grip on my thighs was ironclad. Looking down, I tried to communicate I didn't intend to protest. In fact, a different thought crossed my mind.

The tech mogul, the all-powerful CEO, Milo Sinclair, was kneeling on the floor between my knees. The man was listed on Forbes 30 Under 30 as one of the brightest entrepreneurs under thirty. The man, identified as one of the most impressive men in the world, was shoving my shirt up and staring at every inch of me as if his next breath was impossible without me.

Pride didn't begin to describe my feelings for the success he had attained. However, something more than pride was coursing through me. It made me feel worshipped to know everyone in our vicinity catered to this man while he catered to me. The world kneeled for him, yet he willingly kneeled for me. If anything, he treated it as a privilege.

It was humbling.

I had no idea why I never looked at Milo this way, but it was a turn-on. Milo leaned closer to press small kisses on my thighs, gently teasing me. His lips moved to my core. My legs shook as he licked and nipped at the sensitive flesh, making me moan when he kissed my vulva.

My mouth parted as he picked up the pace. His tongue pressed against my clit, hot and wet pressure localized on one spot. He licked me with manic hunger as if he couldn't live without it. Starved.

"Milo," I panted, throwing my head back.

My hands moved over his bare shoulders. I moaned when he ran his tongue along my inner lips and frantically pulled at his hair. Inadvertently, I tried to close my legs, but Milo was having none of it. He parted them with two strong hands for more access. His mouth on my cunt made me desperate for more, writhing under him. I ground my hip against him and prayed for relief.

"God, I need you inside me right fucking now."

Milo's eyes flipped in shock. It was the last thing he expected to hear, though I could hardly focus on it because the ache between my thighs was insufferable.

"Milo, please," I pleaded.

Milo crawled up my body, kissing his way as I laid back on the bed. He unbuttoned the top two buttons of my shirt and slid my bra cups to the sides to expose my breasts. Milo took one of my hardened nipples into his mouth, sucking hard without clamping down.

Milo hovered over my face. Snaking one hand into my hair and the other around my waist, he slammed his lips onto mine.

It was one of those bruising kisses. Rough. Heady, all tongue, lips, teeth. We kissed each other desperately, as if our lives depended on it, our harsh breaths filling the room.

Milo ran his fingers through my swollen core. Teasing me. Rubbing me. His length pressed against my pussy, grinding against me as I circled my hands around his neck to pull him closer.

“You're shaking,” he whispered abruptly before pulling back.

“What?” I frowned, confused by the interruption. “What are you talking about?”

“Baby, you are shuddering,” he repeated.

I didn't realize he was correct until glancing at the hand resting on his bicep. My fingers were shaking. Looking down, so was my entire body. I was sweating.

“You are scared of me,” he observed quietly. Milo looked... sad. Incredibly sad. Fuck.

“No, I'm just nervous,” I quickly explained.

Milo gave out a laugh that sounded more like a scoff. “You are a terrible liar.”

“It isn't intentional.”

“We both know you're scared of me, but if this is going to work, I need you to feel safe.”

“Milo, I'm not scared.”

“You are,” he insisted. “You’re scared because I can physically overpower you, but you also scare the shit out of me. The physical control is momentary, but your emotional control over me isn’t temporary. I don’t think you understand that yet. Until you do,” he studied my face and whispered, “let’s try something different.”



Milo

“Let’s try something different. So that you can learn to trust me again.”

Raven waited patiently for my explanation. She stared with wide eyes and nodded, worried eyes inquiring the same question on my mind—how?

I moved back from the bed and sat on the floor, leaning against the wooden desk table. Undoing my jeans, I lifted my hips to slide them off. Raven gave my body a once over.

The years without Raven left me... frustrated. I had lost interest in sex. Correction. I was interested in sex, but with only one specific person. It wasn’t hyperbole when I told her she had ruined me for other women. I couldn’t force an attraction that I didn’t feel, for a fuck I didn’t want. Most of my frustrations had to be taken out at the gym between my grueling work schedules. From the looks of it, she liked the results.

“Take off your shirt,” I breathed. I sat a few feet away from the bed, leaning against the base of the table in hopes that the distance made her feel safe.

Raven lifted the shirt above her head. It took everything in my power to keep the stoic look in place.

“The bra too.”

Raven complied once more without argument. I dug my palm into the floor to force myself to stay put as her perfect full tits spilled out.

“Fuck,” I heard my pained voice.

I stared, enchanted by the sight. She still looked like fucking Snow White, with her long lashes fanning her cheeks and her parted red lips. She was the fantasy that was finally within reach of my fingertips.

My breathing was erratic, but I refused to lose control of the situation. "Lean back. Open your legs wide."

Raven didn't break our eye contact. Good girl. She leaned back slightly and opened up. My mouth went dry as I took in her naked, vulnerable body. I took harsh breaths to control myself from pouncing on her.

"Show me how you touch yourself." My words came out choppy.

"What?"

"Play with yourself," I asked more demandingly.

"Umm..." Raven hesitated. "I don't do that."

"Never?"

She shook her head. I masked my shock at her revelation. I didn't want her to feel self-conscious.

"It's nothing to be embarrassed about. Do you know how often I jerk off thinking about you? My dick twitches if I look at you."

Raven blushed, eyes widening. Her chest rose and fell heavily.

"Move your hand down, baby. Don't overthink it."

Raven moved her hand at a languid pace.

"Use two fingers to make small circles. Yeah, just like that."

I fixed my gaze on Raven playing with herself, panting in pleasure. It was more erotic than I had imagined. I stroked my cock, pleasuring myself to the sight of her fingers on her clit.

"Are you wet, Raven?"

My head kicked back when she nodded, eyes rolling to the back of my head. I stroked myself harder. I panted, watching her heavy-lidded eyes fixed on me.

“Fuck. Rub your clit, baby, more, faster.”

Raven rubbed her clit and hissed. “Ahh...”

“That’s it, baby. Don’t stop,” I growled with restraint.

Raven didn’t back down and maintained eye contact.

“Open your legs wider. I want to see that perfect pink pussy of yours.”

“Fuck,” Raven ground out.

“Move your other hand to your tit and pinch your nipple.”

Raven didn’t need my instructions anymore. She vigorously worked herself, having found her rhythm. I was distracted as fuck by her fingers, which had picked up the pace.

I gripped my dick tighter. “God, I’ll never get enough of you. I want to pound your tight pussy so hard until you come for me every goddamn time.”

“Oh, God, Milo,” Raven moaned in a low voice.

“I want to lick that pussy of yours till you come on my mouth over and—”

Raven’s intensified moans cut off my voice as she clenched.

“I want to make you squirt and drench my dick. I want you to do it again in my mouth while I eat you out.”

“I’m about to come,” Raven parted her lips to let out her whimpers, her orgasm hitting her hard and making her body clench. “Fuck, Milo.”

“Fuck,” I echoed. I came with my eyes fixated on her, cum landing on my thighs and hand.

I leaned back against the wooden desk. The room was filled with both of our heavy breathing. A hit of fucking ecstasy, and she was yet to touch me.

However, I wasn't done. I moved toward her. "Baby, I need you to relax."

Raven nodded, still coming down from her high. The afterglow of her orgasm would hopefully divert her body's adverse reactions. I moved Raven's fingers to the side and spread her legs wider to bury my face between them to finish what I had started.

Raven sounded ready to explode when I sucked on her clit. "Oh, God, Milo." She was overstimulated, her fingers digging into my hair. "I can't... again."

"Yes, you can," I muttered against her pussy, lapping at her wet cunt, tasting the juices flowing freely.

Her thighs quacked around my head as she came. She called out my name over and over. Raven's body shuddered, but this time for a different reason.

I sighed in relief, kissing the inside of her thigh. By the time I cleaned the cum residue, Raven might as well have been comatose.



Raven

Milo interrupted my lull with an unexpected question. "There is something else I have meant to talk to you about."

I peeked open one eye as Milo dragged me over his chest. "Sure."

"What were your feelings for me back then?"

"Do you mean when we first started sleeping together?"

Milo nodded, eyes intense as ever.

“I-I don’t know. I think the imbalance of power in our relationship didn’t leave room to view you as a romantic partner,” I admitted hastily.

Yes, I was attracted to Milo back then, but we were at different points in our lives. Our dynamic was different. It wasn’t that Milo dominated the relationship because he was a man. Age wasn’t the problem, either. I dated other older men. The problem was he held more power while I was a minor and was legally under his protection. I often wished Milo had waited to express his interest later in our lives instead of leading with a sexual relationship.

When Milo didn’t respond, I babbled nervously. “It was already difficult for me to process romantic feelings. All I witnessed were broken relationships stemming from romance, and my only definition of love became friendship and family. I guess you could say I put all my eggs in that basket, and my heart simply wasn’t open to entertaining any other types of love.”

I glanced at Milo, hoping my long explanation was sufficient.

“Friendship type of love? Is that why you agreed to be in a relationship with Reid?”

Ay, vey. This was another difficult conversation. I could tell Milo’s mood was quickly shifting.

“Reid was there for me during some difficult times,” I explained. “Mia and Reid felt like my only family for the longest time. When he presented logical arguments about how a relationship between us could be for the better, I couldn’t decline.”

“So, he manipulated you?”

I was taken aback by the harsh words. “I didn’t say that.”

“You implied it.”

“Are you telling me you’ve never manipulated me?” I asked in a frustrated voice.

It was hypocritical for Milo to say this. All three Sinclair siblings, Milo included, had manipulated me at times. It wasn't intentional. They did it absentmindedly. Would I let another person without the Sinclair last name get away with the same things?

Hell no.

Why did I look the other way when it came to them?

In every way, each Sinclair had done more for me than my parents, who brought me to life. Gratitude for the Sinclairs will always exist in my heart.

The way I saw it, it was picking your battles. If it was something I could provide without an extensive fight with myself, it made me happy to do so. I was a Sinclair pleaser, remember? Reid knew I didn't view him romantically. All he asked of me was to try for something more.

Was I aware he worded his argument in a way that would resonate with me? Yes.

Could that be considered manipulation? Perhaps.

All the same, did it change anything? No.

Reid drew a picture of the type of life I had always wanted. I wasn't interested in anyone else, and I never thought Milo and I would be in this position. It would have meant the world to Reid if I had agreed to something more. At the time, nothing was holding me back from considering it. Milo was unforgiving of a simple consideration.

"Now I'm the one manipulating you?" Milo snapped.

"Milo, I don't want to argue over this. When I agreed to Reid's proposition, we hadn't seen each other in years, and you weren't exactly my favorite person. Things have changed between us. I feel differently for you. We are different now. Can we just focus on us?"

Milo searched my eyes for a minute, contemplating. After the momentary pause, he addressed the other elephant in the room. "Do you want to talk about your anxiety?"

I tensed. “I’m fine, Milo. Sometimes, random things set me off. That’s all.”

He nodded against me, waiting for me to expand.

I said nothing more.

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CHAPTER 7



Raven

TIPTOEING INSIDE MILO'S ROOM, I PLACED THE TRAY WITH COFFEE, JUICE, and French toast on his nightstand. I sat on the bed to inspect if he was close to waking up. I wasn't surprised Milo was still asleep. It was late by the time we returned from his condo.

Milo had asked if I wanted to stay the night at his place. The idea was tempting, but Milo was already on edge about my supposed subconscious and physiological reactions. I didn't want to risk him hearing any nightmares, which he would if we were to sleep in the same bed. That would be backward momentum after finally taking giant leaps forward.

Using my fingers, I brushed the hair off his eyes. Milo didn't have the covers on, allowing easy access to every part of his hard and contoured body. His boxers hung low enough to expose his V-cut, and I took a sharp breath, eyes trailing down.

Milo finally opened his eyes. When I beamed at him, he rewarded me with the Sinclair megawatt smile. "Good morning."

I laughed. "It's not morning. It's noon, Sleeping Beauty."

Rubbing his eyes, he let out a yawn mixed with a groan. "If I'm Sleeping Beauty, aren't I supposed to be woken with true love's kiss?"

"Do you want me to go find you your Prince Charming?"

Milo turned his face away dramatically and closed his eyes, somehow looking cuter. "I can't hear anything you say unless I'm kissed and woken up."

"Fine, you fucking liar." I leaned over to kiss him on the cheek. "Oh, and thank you for the flowers. They're beautiful," I whispered.

While at his condo, Milo had someone deliver flowers to the house. Mom put them in my room, waiting for me upon arrival. His systematic efforts made my day. Sometimes it was coffee, and sometimes it was flowers or anything that reminded him of me. My favorite was when he left Post-it Notes in my room with messages. I collected them in the same box where his lunch notes were stored back in the day.

"You're welcome."

"Now, how about you get up so we can have lunch since the breakfast I brought you is ruined?" The tray of food appeared sad. The coffee was cold. The French toast looked soggy. I should have woken Milo instead of ogling at him. "I'll buy you lunch with my new hard-earned cash."

"You're offering to be my sugar momma?" His lips quirked up. "You know what? I've always wanted to be a trophy husband."

"Did you now?" I asked dryly. "Is that why you studied so hard and attended Columbia?"

"Exactly. I was trying to scope out potential future doctors and lawyers who would want a good-looking trophy husband to raise the kids at home."

"Ugh," I sighed exasperatedly. "That sounds genius. Trophy wives have it so good. All they have to do is look good and give good blow jobs."

"You sound envious of trophy wives, baby. If you want to change your career path, I'm not opposed to it. Might someone be considering giving up

their promising career for a life of blow jobs and looking pretty?"

"Someone is not," I pointed out indignantly. "But it's a genius career path. It requires minimum education and qualifications. The least amount of investment for the highest return."

"Let me know if you want me to make your dreams come true." Milo abruptly jumped off the bed before tossing over his shoulder, "Don't move from the bed."

"Why?"

"Just stay there," he barked.

I rolled my eyes at his domineering tone. "Just stay there... please," I corrected.

Milo made a beeline for the bathroom. "Yes, yes. You're trying to teach me how to talk to you like you're my equal. Noted."

"Well, if you want me to be your girlfriend, talking to me like your equal comes with the territory."

Milo peeked from the open bathroom door with a toothbrush hanging off his mouth. He disappeared out of sight to rinse before returning to the door frame.

He smirked at me cockily. "You're my girlfriend?"

My jaw dropped in disbelief. "That's all you took away from what I said?"

He faked a pensive look. "Yes. To be honest, I haven't sowed my wild oats. I don't know if I'm ready for the commitment or that label."

"If you don't want the label, you should stop telling people I'm your girlfriend behind my back."

He flashed me another arrogant smile. I'd heard Milo threaten Brandon continuously to stay away from his girl. Whenever our family members asked about our relationship, Milo slipped in the word boyfriend multiple times, even telling them I was the future Mrs. Sinclair.

Milo needed the world to know I was his because he could never say it. As for myself, I needed trust, respect, and to feel safe around my significant other.

Closing my eyes, I collapsed backward on the bed as it was calling my name. My eyes only flew open when I felt a pair of lips on me.

Milo tried not to touch me abruptly. He made sure to tread heavily to the bed so I'd hear his footsteps. Milo made a display of rustling and dipped the mattress extra hard with his knee. I was curious to see how far he was willing to take it. I was half expecting him to ring a gong.

He's working on making me feel safe.

"I didn't want to kiss you with morning breath," he murmured.

"You've never had morning breath," I said because it was true—a weird phenomenon.

"You never know."

I wrapped my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist. He smiled, and it made me want to stop breathing. What was happening to me? Fuck. The way he looked at me made me feel like the most desired woman on this planet.

There was a whisper in my ear, "Rave?"

"Hmm?"

"Did you stay up all night again?"

Milo hated my sleep schedule or when I pinched myself to wake up. Not to mention, the dark circles under my eyes weren't cute. Some days, I was so fucking delusional from lack of sleep that I couldn't tell if I was dreaming or if stuff was happening. It was embarrassing, but I had run into doors from my haze.

"Rave, you can't keep taking Ambien just to sleep for an hour or two. You know how dangerous they are."

“Milo,” I groaned. “Please, it’s late. No lectures.”

“It’s not late, baby. It’s mid-day, remember? And my lectures are good for the soul. We can discuss what’s causing your lack of sleep if you like.”

That would gut him. I couldn’t bear to be another person Milo worried about. The number of all-nighters he had pulled this month had my heart twisting. All the shit he did for this family was enough stress for one man.

“We can work on identifying the issues and come up with a plan accordingly,” Milo continued with the lecture I had sleepily tuned out with my musings. “I’m serious, baby. We have to work on this. It’s getting worse.”

“I will,” I agreed because otherwise, this man would call every therapist and specialist under the sun if he hadn’t done so already.

Milo sighed, pressing more light kisses over my face. I hummed contentedly. How come it was never this good between us before?

“Good. Now, feed me my breakfast.”

“Excuse me.”

“My breakfast,” Milo repeated. “Feed it to me.”

Rolling my eyes, I humored his ass and located the knife and fork. Cutting through the now soggy French toast with a fork in one hand and knife in the other, I lifted it to his mouth and inwardly grimaced.

Milo took a bite of the toast, and his poker face crumbled. “That’s disgusting.”

I acted offended but couldn’t hold in my laughter. “Hey, I worked hard on that.”

“Really, baby? Did you work hard or just place an order and put it on a plate?”

My face split open. I had no fucking idea how to make French toast. Milo loved French toast, so I ordered it from his favorite breakfast spot.

“I cut up the strawberry and put it on the toast myself,” I proudly announced while Milo chuckled. “And the coffee,” I added. It had to count for something. “Also, the orange juice.”

“You mean you poured orange juice from a bottle into a glass.”

“Well, I held the glass while Mom poured it.”

Milo’s laughter echoed through the room. “Baby, you are pathetic in the kitchen.”

“That’s not true.” I tried to make my case. “What happened to it’s the thought that counts?”

“People only say that when they do thoughtless things.”

I feigned a dramatic show of leaving. I sprung from the bed, but Milo grabbed my elbow to halt me.

It all happened so fast. One moment we were joking around. The next, startled by his sudden move, I attempted to dig the sharp end of the knife into my thigh.

Milo’s quick reflexes kicked in. He immediately grabbed my hand before the knife could do any damage. Prying it out of my hand, he scooped me into his lap in another swift move.

His hands frantically inspected the thigh area around my shorts. When he didn’t notice any damage, he held on to me tightly, occasionally kissing my shoulder.

Neither of us spoke. Milo held on to me as if scared I’d disappear into thin air.

“Milo, I...” I trailed off, unsure of what the hell just happened.

“It’s okay,” he quickly assured, almost as if he was saying it to himself.

“I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You didn’t scare me, baby.” He reached over to kiss my cheek.

“I think I did,” I argued quietly.

“You didn’t.” He placed small kisses all over my face. Milo discarded the knife in the trash as if it’d come back to cut me open.

Leaning back on his pillow, Milo held me to his chest. His usual blank expression fell for a fleeting moment, allowing me to see a face I had never seen on him before, terror mixed with apprehension.

The wheels were turning in Milo’s head.



Milo

“Baby,” I said patiently. “We have to talk about what happened—”

“I know,” Raven cut me off swiftly.

Lifting herself off the bed, Raven stood a few feet away. I rose as well, grabbing a pair of sweatpants off the ground.

After what just transpired, I shouldn’t be in Raven’s vicinity. She was reacting to me in the most unpredictable of ways. Raven could have seriously hurt herself if I weren’t quick to respond.

Next time I might not be quick enough.

I didn’t want to admit it, but her symptoms had worsened. Lack of sleep. Poor appetite. Lack of engagement. I found her lying around in her bed, resembling Tessa. The sight left me horrified.

It was true Raven couldn’t help her adverse reactions. I had noticed her frustration with controlling these physical responses for days. We had to talk about this. She just tried to stab herself with a fucking knife; safety concerns trumped everything else.

“Is there anything I can do to help you feel more comfortable sharing?”

Raven paced my room. Her eyes flickered over every so often, appearing tense. Her analytical brain moved rapidly as if trying to draw a conclusion.

“It would help if I could ask you more questions about your past,” she finally said.

I was unsure how it’d help her to know more about my past, but I was eager to expedite this process before something worse happened. “Sure,” I sighed.

“You said you haven’t had sex in the last few years.”

“That’s correct.”

“So, the last time you had sex—”

Without letting her finish, I blurted out, “The day before you left for Paris.”

We both took an audible breath.

I thought Raven was about to bring up the last time we had sex. In my haste to distract her, I brought up the worst night of Raven’s life, the root of her nightmares.

There were two significant nights in our lives. The last time we had sex and the night before Raven left for Paris.

The last time we had sex was the “incident.” It was the worst night of my life.

The night before Raven left for Paris was the worst night of her life.

Raven stared at me blankly before shaking her head as if chasing the memory away. “During that time, did you try anything other than sex to climax? I know some people are into playing and bondage—”

“No,” I answered without hesitation.

“Nothing else got you off?” Her voice was devoid of all humor, unlike last time.

“No,” I answered again, unable to leave out the irritation in my voice this time.

“Have you ever tried BDSM?” Raven ignored my tone.

“Sure,” I admitted unsurely.

“Are you into it?”

“A few people I slept with were into it.”

“What did they want you to do to them?” she pressed.

“Tying them up, handcuffs, spanking, whipping—”

“Like hurting them?”

“If that’s what they wanted,” I said as if it was no big deal, hoping to move on.

“Dominating them?”

“Sometimes.”

“How about role play? Have you done role play?” Raven determinedly perused ahead.

“Yes.”

“Did it ever include forced sex fantasies?” Raven asked much too casually.

I froze.

I finally understood why Raven had been so curious about my history. It wasn’t because it was an off-limit topic. Raven was trying to discover if my sexual history shaped the outcome of what happened between us, so I didn’t have to take equal responsibility for my actions.

Unlike what Raven believed, I didn’t have a morbid past.

I lost my shit because Raven was a part of me, and being without her was the same as being without the most vital organs and pieces of my body. There were no reasons for my actions other than pure deprivation of her.

“No,” I answered stoically.

“Have you ever forced yourself on anyone else other than me?” Raven asked eerily.

She had every right to an answer, though it didn’t help with the tightness in my chest.

“No, Raven,” I said slowly. “I’ve never forced myself on anyone else.”

Raven opened her mouth again, but I cut her off. “Before you ask, I’ll make this easy for you. I don’t have any sexual trauma. No childhood abuse. No particular kinks. Nothing that interests me about forcing or dominating a woman. The only sexual preference I have is my unquenchable thirst for you.”

“So, it is me,” Raven muttered. “I started this because I am toxic.” Her words weren’t laced with venom. Just sadness.

“No, Rave—” I started, my voice hardly above a whisper, when I noticed her unintentional actions.

Catching her forearm, I inspected the red marks she had just made from pinching herself silly. I cupped her face to turn her to me while pulling her close.

My hold on Raven tightened while she hugged me back just as fiercely.

CHAPTER 8

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SIX WEEKS PRIOR – THE INCIDENT



Milo

I TRIED TESSA’S PSYCHIATRIST FOR THE TENTH TIME AND SLAMMED THE phone down when no one answered. He gave us this number to contact him, but he barely picked up.

He was supposed to have someone on-call for emergencies, but they were also useless. She suggested taking Tessa to the hospital, but Tessa didn’t need hospitalization. Her side effects were long gone. We just wanted to know what caused it.

Everyone was so fucking useless.

I sat at the desk in my parent’s bedroom, pouring over Tessa’s history and physical reports to determine which ingredient in her drug caused an interaction. There were two doctors in the house, but none were familiar with this drug since it was part of a clinical trial. Until now, the medication had been working well.

Tessa started having tremors at brunch earlier today, lost muscle control, and had a full-blown seizure. It was a jarring sight, especially for Raven’s parents.

Tessa had incredibly low self-esteem. She was easily swayed by other people's opinions and often felt down about herself. Paranoid about what others might think, she often refused to leave her bedroom or interact with others.

Tessa was horrified this happened in front of Raven's parents. Embarrassing this family was one of her biggest insecurities. Tessa didn't recover from setbacks quickly. This was a well-known fact in the Sinclair home, the reason everyone was so nervous. That's why we always put our differences aside whenever Tessa-related issues spiral out of control. There was only one other time things got this out of control.

At that time, Dad was working in the Cayman Islands. Mia and Raven were worried about Tessa's deteriorating depression. I saw the effect it was having on them. So, I decided to send Tessa to Grand Cayman and have Dad care for her.

It was the only time I refused to take care of Tessa. Reid, Raven, and Mia were younger. I needed to prioritize their needs over hers.

For a while, Tessa was on a better path. I had hoped she'd turn things, but she fluctuated over the years.

I tried the doctor again and hung up when there was no answer. I stared at the inanimate object. There was one more person I should call. I needed to know Reid was okay.

After she fell down the stairs, Reid came by Raven's room to check on her, only to find her sleeping on my chest. He stayed at the house long enough to ensure she was conscious. Past that, he couldn't deal with seeing us together.

Reid had been absent from the family for long periods before and had a habit of going down a path of self-destruction. I had no fucking idea how to verify if he was alright.

It was odd.

I wanted my brother, Reid, to be alright.

I also wanted to murder Raven's new romantic interest, Reid.

On top of the stress over Reid and Tessa, work had been insane, and I had become the new financier for the living expenses of the seven people residing in this home. Sure, I had money, but New York was expensive, and these people were used to a luxurious lifestyle.

I glanced at the bed and focused on the beautiful girl by Tessa's side. At least I had her again. I let her face enact its usual magic to alleviate the other shit.

Raven leaned against the headboard, her dark hair covering part of the dress she had worn at brunch. Raven looked like the peace I needed, surrounded by the chaos I wanted to avoid.

Tessa was lying on a pillow while Raven stroked her hair. Dad sat in the armchair with his eyes closed, head leaning backward, appearing utterly defeated. Mia was huddled up, her head resting on Tessa's pillow.

This scene was exhausting. I stared at the paperwork spread across the table. Calling more doctors or going through yet another report was daunting.

A soft touch on my shoulders jolted me out of it. "Are you okay?"

I squinted to focus on Raven's blurred-out face. The floor lamp behind her created a halo-like effect around her head, making her look like an answered prayer.

"Yeah," I responded quietly. "Are you?"

Raven nodded. "Do you want me to help you look over the H&P reports?"

I was sure my face gave away my shock. Everyone assumed I'd take care of the next steps, but only one person was still ready to lessen my burden.

Raven didn't wait for my confirmation and pulled up a chair. "I don't know if you recall, but I used to write down every one of Tessa's bad episodes. They're documented by date and symptoms. I told Mia to keep up the same log. Here." Raven dug out a thick notebook and handed it to me. "If I

remember correctly, Tessa experienced tremors while on her old antidepressant drug. We can check for the active ingredient in that drug and cross-reference it to see if the same ingredient is in this new drug.”

Raven sorted through the paperwork, ready to mark all possible medication culprits with her trusty highlighter.

“Since this is a clinical trial, there’s no way to know the side effects and possible interactions, but we can check out the online support group they created for everyone in the trial. We can ask if anyone else experienced similar symptoms.”

I watched her work at manic speed, transfixed by her hazel orbs. She discussed different ideas for a plan of care without so much as taking a breath.

Raven finally paused. “Milo, you look exhausted. If you want to take a break, I don’t mind looking over this.”

“No, I’m fine.” And I genuinely was.

I was no longer thinking of work, finances, my crazy family, or my emotionally devastated, missing brother. All I saw was her, the only person to matter. The only person to make me sane and also the reason for my insanity.

“Does that feel good, baby?”

“Yeaa—” Raven moaned, eyes droopy and words slurred.

I hiked her dress further up to the base of her neck. My eyes peeked behind her at Dad’s and Mia’s silhouettes through the kitchen window. Raven was pinned against a tree in our backyard while I fucked her as quietly as possible.

It was goddamn near impossible when she was this tempting, agreeable, and vocal.

I hoped this corner was dark and far away enough to fly under the radar. We had ten minutes before Dad or Mia came outside looking for us.

Yes. Yes. I was a monster. Especially after Raven so sweetly put aside our differences to help me with Tessa.

I knew she was only letting me back in her life because we were family and in a unique predicament. Like myself, her kryptonite was love, but for this family. When Tessa spiraled out of control, the rest of us banded together. It wasn't far-fetched for Raven to be a team player right now.

Plus, tonight wasn't entirely my fault.

After all the shit with Tessa, Dad and I needed a drink. We were having a glass of brandy in the kitchen when a frustrated Mia and Raven charged us. Wordlessly, Mia opened a bottle of vodka while Raven grabbed two shot glasses. Dad and I stared in disbelief as my underaged little sister pounded a shot with my ex-ward slash current girlfriend (for all intents and purposes). After Mia and Raven slammed their glasses down, Dad reached for two more, placing them in front of Raven so she could pour four shots instead of two. Instead of disciplining Mia, I joined them. We all needed a drink after that mindfuck. So, the four of us quietly took one more shot.

By the fourth round, my eyes were trained on Raven. Her cheeks were flushed, and her words were slurring. Not to mention, she was being friendly toward me.

I never approved of Raven or Reid drinking as teenagers, though the few times she came home tipsy after a party was undeniable. The girl got horny when she was drunk. I was already close to losing my mind, and Raven was the only anchor I needed. I was in no position to discourage what was happening.

Except, I needed her at an intoxicated level, not an incapacitated level.

I put a hand over her shot glass when Dad poured the next round. I let him know she looked flushed and dragged her outside for fresh air. Raven was too drunk to protest.

After a quick assessment, I sought the darkest corner with a tree and picked her up with one hand. Raven was giggling and receptive. I threw my peacoat around her, pushed her against the tree, and hefted her so the tree bark wouldn't bruise her beautiful skin.

With her dress hiked up and her thong pushed to the side, Raven bounced on my cock. Her dress had a built-in bra, so it was easy to expose her perfect breasts. I loved that Raven wore dresses around the house, most likely to appease Theresa.

My hands roamed the front of her body. Raven's nipples were hard from the cold. I slightly pinched one, causing her to inhale sharply.

"I missed you," I said against the shell of her ear before licking it.

Raven groaned. "Milo—"

My lips were on her neck as I undid my belt and pants. Raven wasn't fighting back tonight. Instead, she fisted my shirt with her hands and mumbled something unintelligible.

With one hand under her ass and the other holding my cock, I rubbed it between her folds. She was wet, but not nearly enough.

I slid two fingers inside her mouth.

"Baby, suck on my fingers."

For a moment, Raven did nothing. When I stroked her tongue again, Raven sucked on my fingers. I retracted them, replacing them with my mouth for a deep kiss. She tasted like hard liquor, her tongue moving lazily against mine.

Using the lubricated fingers, I reached for her cunt and stroked her core until she let out another moan.

"You like that, baby?"

“Yeah,” she choked out.

“Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?” I murmured, pressing my digits on her clit.

Raven whimpered against my mouth. “Milo, don't let go.”

Fuck. Me.

I didn't know if she meant physically or metaphorically, but I could barely restrain my growl as I slipped inside her slick heat.

“Fuck.” I kissed her parted lips.

The dirty talk spilled out of me, demanding admission for the things she refused to acknowledge.

“Tell me you want me.”

“Mmhmm.”

Shoving my cock deeper, I grabbed her face and explored her mouth. Her hands landed on my chest for balance as her juices spread wetly between us.

“Fuck,” I growled, her cunt suctioning me relentlessly. “Do you like me fucking your tight little pussy?”

“Oh, God.” Raven groaned, tilting her head back.

I held her firmly in place, shuddering from her soaked pussy. Her quick reaction had my cock jerking inside. “Fuck. Fuck.” Mashing my teeth, I gripped her hip for control.

“Oh God,” Raven shuddered, moaning incoherently as my fingers moved deftly on her swollen core.

“Scream my name when you come,” I hissed.

“Milo.” Raven arched her back and called out my name. Her cries of ecstasy were almost a little too loud.

That's all it took for me to spill inside her. "God, Rave." I punched the tree bark.

Panting hard against her mouth, I found Raven in a near-comatose state from her orgasm.

"Hi, pretty girl." I smiled, but Raven was already snuggling against me, her eyes drifting shut.

I quickly smoothed her dress and fixed my clothes. By the time I was done, Raven had no interest in walking, arms wrapped around my neck.

"Raven had a little too much to drink," I announced, entering the kitchen with Raven curled up in my arms. "She looked about to pass out on the patio, so I'm going to put her to bed."

"You kids can't handle your liquor," Dad jested.

"You guys weren't on the patio." Mia pointed out, tilting her head to the side.

I glared at Mia before turning to Dad. "Don't let her drink anymore." I nodded at Mia and waited until Dad put away the liquor bottle. "Good night."

As I left, Mia's frown followed me.

Whatever. As far as they were concerned, Raven was my girl, and I could put her to bed if I wanted. I was positive Raven had intended to correct our families about our relationship status, but her plan was interrupted when larger problems presented themselves. Since the focus had shifted to Tessa, Raven hadn't bothered to address the status quo of our romantic relationship, nor had anyone asked us about it. There were more pressing matters in the house.

While Raven was distracted, I willfully slipped in terms such as girlfriend and future Mrs. Sinclair as frequently as possible to get our parents accustomed. I needed to solidify this before Raven snapped out of the Tessa orbit.

However, two people remained unconvinced—my siblings. Reid wasn't here, and Mia was also stuck in the same Tessa orbit.

For me, Tessa was just another obligation and an item on my to-do list. Mia wasn't so jaded, which worked out in my favor because, for once, Mia was distracted.



My room was the master. Though I was barely in New York anymore and owned a condo, my parents never switched back. It was more private than Raven's room, so I brought her here. I had barely undressed her when Raven closed her eyes.

It had been years since Raven slept in my bed, though all I wanted to do was wake her up. She was right here for the taking. Pliable. Vulnerable. Unresistant. I drew imaginary lines on her arm. Dipping my head down, I kissed and licked my way across her bottom lip.

"Mmm..." Raven moved her face sleepily when I gently bit down.

Dropping down, I made a trail by licking every part of her bare skin. I tasted the subtle vanilla flavor of her breasts, her navel, and the cleft of her vulva. Moving my body further down, I made a space for myself between her thighs.

My hands parted her legs apart with my tongue at her slit.

Raven's hips bucked as she moaned.

I lapped at her wet folds, my head wedged between her thighs. Raven's sleepy moans turned louder as I sucked on her clit.

Fuck, she tasted so good. I'd never get enough of the taste of her pussy and throbbing clit in my mouth.

Raven shuddered in her sleep, spurring me on. I buried my face in her, stabbing my tongue inside her walls, starving to make her come.

I licked her punishingly hard as Raven gave a strangled cry, head thrashing back and forth. “Oh, my God.” Raven woke midway through her orgasm.

Still coming, her back arched off the mattress. I increased the friction to lengthen her climax, the movement of my tongue slowing but the pressure staying strong.

“Fuck,” she sobbed, hands fisting the comforter.

I crawled up her body and rubbed my dick against her pussy. Raven panted, having barely come down from her high.

“I need you, baby,” I moaned into her mouth, hardly restraining myself. She was so beautiful, her hair disheveled and her lips bruised from my kisses.

Raven was still drunk and horny, and responsive, despite the spurts of sleep. Slowly, I sheathed myself inside her again, keeping her recently injured leg in mind.

“Holy shit,” I groaned through my clenched teeth.

I fucked her slowly, savoring every thrust to push her into a gradual climax. In her current state, Raven mirrored the way I generally responded to her. Like she’d go crazy in her need for me. She squirmed for friction, arms wrapping around my neck to pull me closer.

“God.” Raven bit down on her bottom lip as she went off.

“Fuck.” I followed her into the same obscurity of pleasure, inhaling her scent like it was the oxygen I needed to stay alive.

Afterward, I idly stared at Raven, playing with her hair. She was barely lucid, eyes fluttering. I kissed her eyelids, lips moving languidly over her cheeks.

I stopped upon feeling Raven tremble underneath.

I leaned back to survey her. “What the—”

Her eyes widened as if waking from a bad dream. Her arms flayed, and she was covered in night sweat. She was fully shuddering, though unable to

speaking in her strangled voice.

What the fuck.

Taken back by the turn of events, I quickly pulled out and urgently shook her. “Rave!”

Raven appeared to be experiencing a fear-induced night terror with her eyes fully open. She was unresponsive while staring at me with hatred.

Shit. I had only seen that look on her face once before, and I never wanted a repeat. “Baby,” I tried again. “What’s going on?”

Raven remained mute, though I realized it wasn’t from a lack of trying. She was in shock.

“Raven, can you talk to me?” I shook her again, hoping to jar her out of this panic.

Despite my best efforts, her symptoms continued. Without any other avail, I pulled the covers over her and held her tightly until her breathing evened out. Eventually, Raven calmed down, mostly into a lull due to the liquor.

Fuck. Was that the after-effect of being with me?

I promised myself I wouldn’t do this to her again, and things would be different this time.

I thought Raven only freaked out if I forced her. Technically, I didn’t force her tonight. Perhaps my proximity alone terrified her into grueling repercussions.

While Raven didn’t post much on social media, Reid did. Looking at their photos over the last couple of years, I couldn’t help but notice she was happy. Yet, Raven had been different since her return.

Raven made my life better, while Reid made everything better for her. If I couldn’t do that for her... the worst thoughts popped into my mind. Thoughts like, perhaps it’d be better if I stayed away from her.

I quickly shelved away the peculiar thought. It wasn't an option. I had never entertained such a thing. I simply had to find an alternative.

My gaze remained horizontal, still obsessing over the only woman I wanted.

Her gaze remained vertical, hating every part of me.

She can hate me all she wants. That's alright. I love her enough for both of us.

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CHAPTER 9

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THE PRESENT



Raven

MIA CHARGED THROUGH MY OPEN BEDROOM DOOR WITH PURPOSE. I ROSE from the bed to greet her. “Hey.”

Instead of responding, Mia closed the door and hurriedly threw her arms around me. It took a full second to register Mia was hugging me.

Milo finally convinced Tessa to get back on her medication. Since the knife incident yesterday, Milo hadn’t come near me, so I had no idea how he managed it. Seeing that Mia had been cloistered in Tessa’s room for weeks, surely, she was relieved. So, her rampant emotions made no sense. Nonetheless, I hugged her back tightly.

“Mia, is everything okay?”

“Yeah, I have just been so worried about you,” she whispered, refusing to let go.

My leg had been healing slowly, but I wasn’t sure if it deserved Mia’s abrupt concern. I held her at arm’s length. “Mia, I am fine.”

“I know,” Mia said through a broken smile but couldn’t keep it up. She let out a sob, which turned into full-on tears.

“Mia!” I exclaimed. “What's wrong?”

This had to be more than her concern over my health. Was this about college or moving out?

No. Mia had no problem in that arena. She wanted to leave this house.

What other drama did teenagers have? Boys?

“Mia.” I tried to smile but failed. “Please put me out of my misery. What's going on?”

“I wanted to ask you that. How's everything with you?”

I gave her a confused look. “I told you, I'm fine. You don't have to worry about me.”

“How is everything with Milo?” she asked more pointedly.

In the shuffle of it, we hadn't had the chance to discuss my impromptu tumble with Milo and Reid's unprecedented reaction afterward, but I knew we'd have to talk about the Milo debacle eventually.

“Mia...” I hesitated. “Do you want to talk about what's going on between Milo and me?”

Mia gently placed one hand on my arm. “Rave, do you want to talk about what's going on between Milo and you?”

“S-sure if you want me to. What would you like to know?”

“Whatever you are ready to share,” Mia murmured.

I didn't respond, perplexed. I was unsure what Mia was insinuating, but her tone kept me rooted. There was a tingly feeling in the back of my brain.

“I overheard you and Milo yesterday.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked cautiously.

“Rave,” Mia spoke slowly. “I love Milo. He's not only my brother but also the only parent I have known. I love you, too. You're my sister.”

Mia's gaze was steady yet sympathetic. She stared at me with glossy eyes, ready to open the floodgates again, looking at me with sadness. Immense sadness.

Mia knew.

I had no idea what exactly she knew, but she was aware of our twisted relationship to some extent. Like always, Mia had figured something out. She was one of the most emotionally intelligent people, and right now, she was gearing up for something I wasn't ready to acknowledge.

"Rave," Mia started again, "I love you. We all love you. No matter what happens, I want you to know that none of this is your fault. I'm so sorry I insinuated otherwise. Just because Milo is my brother doesn't mean I wouldn't support you. If you want to come forward—"

"We should go downstairs for dinner," I cut Mia off with a glare, silently willing her to shut up.

Had Mia lost her damn mind? Did she consider the weight of the words she was just about to utter? Words that should never be spoken out loud or in the light of day. If those words got out, it would tear apart Uncle Reese and Dad's lifelong brotherhood bond. My parents would never speak to any of the other Sinclairs and insist I did the same.

My parents were living here based on Milo's financial support. My father would rather be on the streets than accept Milo's money or continue living here if he found out what Milo did. He would also ensure Milo ended up in jail. Our lives would be left in shambles.

"You don't owe Milo anything," Mia sighed. "If you want to come forward, I'll be there. I'll support you."

"Mia," I warned in a stern voice. "You have no idea what you are talking about."

"Just because he signed some papers to be your guardian doesn't give him the right—"

"I don't know what you think you know, but—"

“You don't have to protect him.”

“I'm not protecting anyone,” I snapped. It's the truth. I wasn't protecting Milo. I've had plenty of opportunities for retribution, but my road to recovery had always been redemption, never about revenge. Plus, this situation was more complicated than I could articulate. Consent, non-consent, force, coercion, sex, comfort...all those lines had blurred at some point with Milo.

I couldn't ruin our lives over blurred lines.

“Just stop talking.” I held up my hand and raised my voice. Clearly, Mia knew enough to destroy our lives. I had to do damage control and convince her it was all a farce. “You sound ridiculous and confused. How can you think so little of your brother?”

“I'm not confused. I suspected something was wrong, then I overheard you guys.”

“You heard wrong,” I said with a fake sternness I didn't feel.

“I did not. You're in denial, which would be fine if the situation weren't unsafe for you.”

“Why would the situation be unsafe for me?”

“Because Raven, Milo rape—”

“STOP!” I shrieked, the pitch of my voice making her jump.

This room was turning fucking suffocating. Maybe I could climb out the window. Were there no exits other than the one door Mia was blocking?

“Rave.” Mia dropped her voice with more tears streaming down her cheeks. “I'm sorry. I'm not trying to push you. You have every right to discuss this at your pace, but I am worried about your safety. I don't even know what he's doing to you. What would you do if the situation were reversed? If someone did that to me, would you just sit back and watch?”

“Mia.” I took a horrified step back.

My mouth went dry while my eyes flickered to a familiar spot on the floor. Terrible images danced in my head. The thought of Mia lying in that same spot as someone she trusted trapped her and ripped into her. The idea of her crying out for help and begging for a way out... I'd endure all kinds of hell to protect Mia from that experience.

And that's what Mia was trying to do, putting herself through hell to protect me by giving up her favorite person in the world—Milo.

Unfortunately, I viewed the world differently. Good people could do bad things, and punishment wasn't the only path to redemption.

Milo was a good man who had made some terrible mistakes. Things had changed between us, and retribution was the last thing I sought.

"Mia," I spoke steadily. "I think there has been a terrible misunderstanding."

Mia shook her head. "Rave," she whispered. "I love you, but this is your story and your decision. I just want you to know that I'm here for you. And I know that my brother will step up and right the wrong he did. It's the only way he can become the person he was meant to be."

I should be proud of Mia. I should hug her and thank her for being there for me. For willing to unblur the lines for my sake.

Yet, I hated everything she said.

With every word Mia uttered, she thought less of Milo. It was written all over her face. I was also embarrassed for myself. My little sister was teaching me how to come forward with a #MeToo moment. It was supposed to be my job to teach her.

Pushing past Mia, I rushed to open the bedroom door while tuning out Mia's sobs and pleas to stay. I took the stairs and grabbed my jacket and keys from the valet tray. After a momentary hesitation, I grabbed another key from the tray before flinging the front door wide open to run out of this god-forsaken home.

“Rave, what are you doing here?”

I watched Milo sit next to me on the porch steps from my peripheral.

We were at my old brownstone, a few doors from the Sinclairs. After Dad and I moved out, the owners started doing Airbnb. Reid and I came here whenever the owners couldn't rent it out. I still had a key, and they never changed the locks. It seemed like the perfect place to escape the Sinclair drama.

For years, that family was a conundrum for me. They were a large family, yet they were so damn lonely. Their lives seemed perfect from the outside, but it was all a facade. I pined to be one of them, but that hope was now burnt to a cinder.

“Mia knows,” I declared without provocation.

“I know.” When I turned my head in surprise, Milo explained, “Mia spoke to me. She was pretty angry.”

“I didn’t tell her,” I offered quickly.

Comforting strokes ran through my hair as we stared into the dark backyard. “Mia’s too smart for her good.”

“She wants me to tell everyone what you did.”

Milo glanced at me with an understanding nod. “I’m proud of her,” he said with amusement. “All those years, I thought she was tuning out my lectures.”

I scowled at the image of Milo behind bars, suddenly irritated by his presence. “Why do you Sinclairs all think alike?” I muttered under my breath.

“We have to take responsibility for our actions. Isn’t that what I taught all of you?”

“Or you can make better choices,” I snapped, unable to hide the sourness in my voice. “Then there are no bad actions to take responsibility for.”

Milo glared at me in response. “You are just upset because you fought with Mia, and Reid’s not around to pick up the pieces,” he spat out icily.

“Aren’t you?” I asked. “He’s your brother, and he might never speak to you again either.”

“I assumed the risk.”

He did, but he also forced me to assume the same risk. Milo forced a choice down my throat, ending the lifelong bond I had shared since birth.

Despite my stubborn stupor, I knew this wasn’t all Milo’s fault unless he orchestrated getting us discovered. Although I was beating a dead horse, I needed him to deny it at least once. If Milo purposefully shoved our naked bodies in Reid’s face, it might be the cruelest thing he had done.

“What do you mean you assumed the risk? Do you mean you assumed the risk by exposing us to our families?”

“How many times are you going to ask me the same damn question?” Milo asked coolly.

“Yet you’re still to give me a yes or no answer. How do you expect us to move forward if I can’t trust you? So, I’m going to ask you one more time. Did you or did you not ask our parents and Reid to come to your room that day?”

“No. I didn’t ask our parents to come to my room, nor did I ask Reid.”

I don’t fucking believe him.

Milo had always been honest with me, so why the fuck didn’t I believe him? Trust, once broken, was impossible to repair. The thought left me with so much resentment.

I wanted my Milo to comfort me and tell me everything will be okay. I could never have the Milo I wanted without the threat of the other man lurking in his shadows. I resented the lack of trust and my body for reacting poorly around him, although something else might help me forget this truth

of ours. I came here to find Mia's weed stash to drown out our previous conversation.

Moving from the stoop, I headed toward the sliding doors.

"Rave, what are you doing?" Milo followed me.

I jiggled the key into the lock, unlocked the door, and slid it open.

"Raven," Milo grabbed my arm. "You can't go in there. Have you lost your fucking mind?"

"Yes!" I turned around with so much fury that Milo tensed. "I've lost my fucking mind. You're not the only person who gets to lose their mind and use it as an excuse to justify their behavior." I jabbed my index finger at my chest as years of pent-up resentment poured out. "Why?" I asked sharply. "Why'd you do it? And why did you do it only to me?"

I have never forced anyone else. That's what he told me. Why did I get to be the lucky one? If our past hadn't tainted us, things could have been different between us.

"What did I ever do to you that was so horrible you had to do that to me?" I spoke over my harsh breathing. "Speak!" I shouted. "Answer me."

Seemingly bewildered by my accusation, Milo remained mute.

Frustrated, I turned away to slip inside the house.

Milo followed me, sliding the door shut. I roamed my old house, scouring for the special floorboard where Mia hid her weed. I stiffened upon hearing Milo's voice in the dark living room, barely lit by the moonlight streaming through the windows.

"Do you remember the first time we met? We met in this room."

I remembered. I was so excited to finally meet the Great Milo Sinclair, the golden boy who was a phantom to me.

"I hadn't seen you in years, but you became a part of my family and my best friend. We connected on a level I had never experienced. I don't know

when I fell in love with you. I just know it's been almost a decade, and I still can't pull myself out of that vortex."

There was that word again—love. Milo had coupled it with such atrocious actions that it felt like an antonym.

"You'd smile at me like I was your whole world, and everyone joked about your crush on me. However, no one knew how I felt about you. I was older, so I had to look the other way."

Milo strutted toward me, refusing to let me ignore his words or walk away.

"So, when your dad asked me to take care of you, I agreed. I thought if those lines could never be crossed, we'd outgrow the feelings. I bottled my emotions, hoping to get over it. I didn't. Then one day, you said you loved me, and everything changed. I gave in, thinking we had put a lid on our feelings for far too long."

I inhaled sharply and stopped in my tracks in a darker part of the room. Milo paused as well, standing only a few feet away.

"You said no to plenty of men before me. Why didn't you say so from the start if you didn't want me? Why did you do it, Rave? And why did you do it only to me? What did I ever do to you that was so horrible you had to do that to me?"

When I didn't respond, Milo stepped out from the dark, face resolute for the answer he sought.

"Answer me," he demanded in a low voice. "Why did you go along with it for so long and let me believe I'd finally get to be with you? Why give me hope only to rip it away?"

I pushed against his chest on impulse. "How was I supposed to say no to you?" I countered. "I was seventeen, and you dictated my life. You made all my decisions, so how the hell was I supposed to choose differently when you chose for me? A person with any sense would know better than to pursue a high kid school under their care."

“I didn’t have any sense left when it came to you,” Milo chewed out. “I didn’t see you as a high school kid. I saw you as my friend. My confidante. I can’t say I regret it. It’s better to have been with you than never knowing what it’s like. I was already in too deep by the time you panicked. You broke my heart, and I didn’t know how to deal with it. I fucking lost it.”

I held up a hand. “Don’t, Milo. Don’t tell me how I broke your heart when you treated me like your hooker. All we did was fuck and all you said was, Come to my room.”

The room turned deafeningly quiet as Milo processed my words. We stared at each other in the dark, chests rising and falling.

Minutes went by before he addressed my remark. “I was inexperienced with relationships,” he admitted. “And you were so non-confrontational. Our physical connection reflected our undeniable feelings, so I let it be. But when you broke things off... Nothing is worse than being in love with someone who doesn’t love you. It’s torture. I was looking for a way to connect with you...” His voice trailed off with a glazed look.

This was too hard, and I couldn’t do this with a sober mind. I turned around wordlessly to resume my original search. Confused by the sudden movement during a deep discussion, Milo dogged my steps to the familiar spot. Kneeling on the hardwood, I tapped on the floorboard with my knuckles.

“It’s not here,” Milo informed. When he found me staring at him in disbelief, he followed up. “Raven, I raised three teenagers next to a near-abandoned house. It’s not rocket science. I know the owners and have a spare key in case of emergencies. I inspect the place regularly.”

I openly gaped at Milo. I needed to forget, yet he was still controlling my every move.

Of all the things he had done, this was the worst. It shouldn’t be, far from it, but something in me snapped.

I glared at Milo, pupils dilating. My breathing turned ragged, adrenaline spiking. My heartbeat picked up at an alarming rate.

Before Milo could react, I made a fist with my right hand, drew it back, and punched him right in his fucking face.

Holy shit. “Ow. Fuck. Fuck,” I cried out, covering my fist with my other hand and hunching over in pain.

I punched Milo square in the jaw, but Milo, the fucking hulk, had an iron jaw. Pretty sure my fist was broken.

“Damnit, Rave,” Milo put his hands around my shoulders with irritation. “Let me see. You probably broke your finger,” he snapped.

“Get off me.” I shook him off, holding my right hand tightly to my chest.

“Just let me take a look at it,” he said more gently, this time as if trying to alleviate my descent into madness.

This was when the caring guardian showed up? Not while he was fucking me and didn’t have the decency to stop after I asked him to? He cost us our chance and lost himself to the dark side. He cost me my fucking sanity, too, and he didn’t even know it.

So, insanity it was, and insanity took over.

I flung myself at Milo. Using the same right hand, I landed another punch.

“Raven, stop. You’re going to hurt yourself.” Milo moved easily to avoid my assaults, agitation spiking with every word.

Ignoring the pain, I focused on the pure adrenaline, landing punch after punch on his face, neck, and shoulders.

Milo closed his eyes as if resisting his urge to roll them. For a moment, I wondered if he’d retaliate, though something told me he was humoring me. At most, my attacks seemed like tiny needles annoying him with their prickling.

Finally, he grabbed both my arms, trying to calm my hysteria. “Shh. Stop, Rave. You’re still injured from your fall, and I don’t want you fracturing your fingers on top of that.”

Using my left foot, I stomped on his right. Milo was so shocked by my insane array of strikes that he let go of my arms. Stumbling forward, I spun in place. “It sucks, doesn’t it, Milo?” I yelled. “When you ask someone to stop, and they don’t stop.”

He stood a safe distance away, but his stunned expression was visible.

Having tired myself out, I momentarily stopped flailing. There was blood on my knuckles. My hands were about to fall off while Milo remained unscathed.

He watched me closely. His body language was clear, and he was thinking of different ways to fix me. His protective instincts were out. Milo, the caretaker, was in full-blown concern mode.

Except, I didn’t want this guy right now. I wanted Milo, the lust-crazed sociopath. That was the only person I wanted to hurt at this moment.

“Where the fuck was all this concern while you were having your way with me and ruining my life?”

“I wasn’t trying to ruin your life,” Milo deliberated. “Come on, Rave. It’s been years. Clearly, you want to be with me, too. Forgive me already so that we can be togeth—”

“NEVER!” I yelled at the top of my lungs.

The word echoed through the silent room. It vibrated through us, bouncing off the still walls. As the word settled in, a dark cloud took over Milo. My blind punches weren’t adequate, though I sensed the effect that word had on him. Milo’s jaw ticked as he visibly ground his teeth. The fleeting anger in his eyes set in, and the tendons on his arms rose.

“You’re so fucking stubborn.” Milo’s cold, detached tone was laced with quiet fury. “But so am I. The difference is I have no boundaries when it comes to you.”

Milo stepped closer, and it took every ounce of control not to bolt.

“Do you know what my first instinct was after I found out about Reid? I wanted to tie you to my bed and fuck the idea out of your head. I wanted to roam the streets of New York to kill my own brother. I still haven’t decided whether I’m going through with it.”

I inhaled sharply.

Milo, the caretaker, had officially left the building.

Hello, lust-crazed sociopath.

The sociopath I wanted to hurt reminded me why I ran in the first place. I walked backward until hitting the tall column in the middle of the room. Milo crowded me with his body. I spun in place, flattening my palm on the column, so the front of my body didn’t crash into it. Milo was next to me within a second, his rapid breaths indicating his wrath.

“Are you scared, Raven?” he growled. “That’s how I feel every time losing you becomes a possibility. I’ll fight until my last breath if that’s how long it takes to keep you. You’ve consumed me. Loving you—”

“Jesus. What you did wasn’t love,” I cut him off sharply. Grabbing the collar of his shirt, I pulled him close enough to feel his breath against my cheeks, letting him read the loathing painted on my face. “So, why did you do it, Milo?”

“Because I have no control around you,” he hissed. “Because I’m obsessed with you. I love y—”

“No.” I tightened my fist on his collar, jerking him. “You don’t deserve to say those words.”

“I suffered for years without you, and you can’t hear me say it? I fucking love—”

“SHUT UP!” I yelled at the top of my lungs.

“NO,” he thundered, equally loud. “You will listen to the fucking words. I love—”

I didn't let Milo finish the sentence and slammed my lips to his. I pushed him against the column. One of my arms snaked around his neck to grip his hair.

Milo froze from shock but suddenly moved at an all-mighty speed as realization dawned on him. He grabbed my ass to pick me up while my legs naturally wrapped around his waist. I leaned into him, forcing his back to hit the column harder.

I kissed him fiercely.

Rough.

Demanding.

Hateful.

Milo pulled me closer to his chest, his other hand frantically grabbing at the hem of my dress to slide it up to my hips. My hands traveled between us to unbuckle his belt and undo his pant buttons. I pulled down his zipper and reached inside his boxers to pull out his dick.

Neither of us came up for air. I aggressively stroked his tongue with mine and his cock with my hand. I used my other hand to pull my thong to the side. I slid him into my folds to position him, lifted my body slightly off his, and slammed myself down.

"Fuck," Milo broke the kiss to pant.

With the other hand around Milo's neck, I placed my palm flat on the column, using the support to rock myself against him.

He stared at me with awe, unable to speak. Skimming his hands from my thighs to my ass, Milo walked backward until my back hit the wall by the window.

Rapidly smoothing my hands across Milo's chest, I shed his jacket. He alternated his hands so I could peel off each sleeve, tossing the coat over his shoulders.

Bending his knees slightly, Milo ground into me. I reached for the window curtain next to me for leverage as Milo hit every spot on my sex.

“God.” I bit down on my bottom lip, digging my heels into his back.

Milo moved us off the wall and walked with me in his arms. A loud thud, followed by something falling on the floor, jolted me from the lust.

“What the fuck was that?”

Milo didn’t respond. We bumped into something else in the dark, but I didn’t bother asking what shattered this time. He reached the living room, pushing us down to the soft rug.

Before my back hit the rug, I wrapped my legs around his waist and shoved at his shoulders, turning us over to straddle him.

Lifting, I braced a palm on his chest and sank further into him.

“Holy shit, baby!” Milo trembled under me, lifting his head to catch my lips between his.

I removed my jacket, untied the knot of my wraparound dress, and slid it off myself before undoing my bra. It was a cold day, and the heat was turned off in this house. I should have been freezing, but my body was on fire. My blood sizzled, my bones burning.

“If this is what you wanted, all he had to was ask,” he murmured, sounding fascinated. “You didn’t have to go through all this trouble.”

“Shut up!” I spat.

Milo laughed with a low chuckle. “No need to be so touchy, baby.” He grabbed my chin to tip my face down. “Now, look at me.”

“No.” I batted his hand away.

Milo frowned, quickly snuffing the fleeting anger and reaching between us with his thick fingers. He parted my folds, fingers grounding against my clit.

Oh, shit. My palm landed flat on his chest. “Fuck.”

“That’s it. Tell me how much you want this.”

My eyes flew open, and I glared at him. Milo applied more pressure to my clit, silently challenging me to deny his claim.

Eyes fluttering closed, head thrown back, I forgot to argue. “Oh, God.”

“Tell me,” he urged, ceasing the motion of his fingers as a threat.

“Fuck, I want this,” I conceded.

Milo resumed the torture at my admission as I rolled my hips mindlessly. “Fuck, yes.”

I slammed into him, making him vibrate underneath. Milo grunted like an animal with each thrust. I smashed into his pelvis until I came with tears seeping out of my eyes.

Milo quickly peeled off his T-shirt, lifting to a seated position. With a strong hand around my waist, Milo moved me to his will as if I were a limp rag doll. His eyes bore into mine, and he kept a punishing pace.

My senses heightened as he sent aftershocks throughout my overstimulated system. Milo took one of my nipples into his mouth and flicked it with his tongue, sending me into another earth-shattering orgasm.

“Oh, God.” I threw my head back.

“Fuck,” Milo panted during his climax.

Milo had barely pulled out before falling backward on the rug, with me on top. He covered me with both arms and buried his nose into my hair in contentment as I melted into him.

I couldn’t find the weed, but a different drug gave me precisely what I needed.

Numbness.

Oblivion.

Once again, the assailant of the cause of this ruin was the one to calm me down.

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CHAPTER 10



Milo

THE TASTE OF BLOOD HIT MY PALETTE. FUCK. THERE WAS DRIED BLOOD ON my chest and neck as well. Stretching out one of my sore arms, I lifted my head to find a mass of black hair over my chest and a chaotic scene around me. I barely recalled drifting off.

The house was in worse condition. The place looked like a hurricane hit it.

Raven was lying dormant on my chest, hopefully sleeping. My cock stirred every time I breathed her in. I smoothed her hair by gently untangling the knots with my fingers. Her hair was messy, she had hickeys all over her neck, and I bet her makeup was smudged.

She resembled the chaos surrounding us.

This scene was exactly what I had wished for, burning everything in my path until we were both surrounded by nothing but chaos. Our path was now clear of external obstacles.

My wish had been granted, so why was it making me uneasy about how this girl was unraveling? While I could handle Raven becoming unhinged, I

doubted she could. I had never seen Raven lose her shit like that. Perhaps my past actions pushed her too far.

While I felt obligated to defend the relationship I cherished, Raven's assessment of our history was correct. My assumption of a seventeen-year-old Raven's level of maturity was wrong. She was an understanding person and lacked strong emotions. I misjudged her non-reactive nature for maturity. I expected her to voice it if she didn't want me.

I held a position of power, and she felt pressured to go along with my desires. I should have waited until Raven was eighteen. As a minor, her decisions weren't her own. I was a functioning adult by seventeen. We acted so alike; I assumed she was, too.

I hid our relationship, never realizing it made Raven feel cheap. My stunted growth rivaled Raven's, and these bad decisions led us down a path of darkness. I stared at the girl I had dragged into the dark with me.

"Rave?" I said in my hoarse voice.

Raven lifted her head as I trailed my fingers between her thighs and slipped into her folds. Fuck. She was still dripping, a mixture of both of us.

Lifting my head, I tilted to nibble on her ear. Our chests moved fast, faces covered in the same animalistic lust.

We had to talk about the fucked up shit from tonight, but not at this moment. No words passed between us. Raven wasn't shuddering out of fear, and my mind was on a single track before it changed.



Raven

"Milo?" I blinked to orient myself. "How long have you been sitting there?"

"A while," he replied. A pair of piercing green orbs stared at me. Milo was sitting on the couch next to my horizontal body. His boxers were back on,

while I only had a quilt covering my naked body.

Our night consisted of an endless cycle of sex and sleep. Against the wall, over the arm of the sofa, on the floor, every inch of this house. The light seeping through the windows indicated it was finally dawn.

I rose to a seated position on the couch, fully awake. “What’s going on?”

“I was going to ask you the same. What’s going on with you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Last night, you displayed more emotions than ever before. I’ve never even seen you stomp your foot in anger.”

“So?”

“You lost it last night, Rave,” he stated quietly. Milo assessed me like he had figured me out for the first time. “You threw a shit storm. You went off the rail with actual physical attacks.” Milo grabbed one of my arms to pull me closer to him. “Tell me the truth. What’s going on with you?”

“I had a fight with—”

“Enough, Raven. Do you hate me that much?” His shaky voice matched the trembling in his breathing. “It’s killing me right now to think only a few weeks around me can do this to you. You were fine and dandy around Reid while I seemed to be destroying you.” Milo’s fingers flexed into my arms when I didn’t respond. He leaned in, voice muffled. “Do you love him?” he gritted out as if he couldn’t stomach the words, let alone the thought. “Is that why?”

Recognizing this topic as a trigger for Milo, I gently pushed off and stood. Grabbing his jacket off the floor, I wrapped it around and moved to the couch’s end. I pulled my knees to my chest, resting my chin on them, and stared at the man sitting across from me.

“I loved Reid a long time ago, when we were kids,” I stated evenly.

“And now? Do you still love him?”

“No. Once we grew up... he became my family. That's all, I swear. Reid's aware of it, too. He simply wanted me to try for more. I did because he has always been my other half.”

Milo scoffed. “Sounds like love to me.”

“No, Milo. I don't love him,” I said patiently. “I love you.”



Milo

Time stopped.

The universe came to a screeching halt. My heart was hammering way too hard, ears ringing as if I just had the best fuck of my life. I never thought anything on earth could be better than our physical connection. I was wrong. This was better.

“Did you just say—”

“I love you,” Raven repeated easily.

Stumped, I ultimately spoke in a bewildered voice. “I love you, too. Look, I know we have some work ahead of us. I know why you have been reacting so poorly around me. I've been talking to some specialists—”

“Milo,” Raven cut me off. “There are a few things I have to tell you about that I was hoping to avoid. However, you need to hear them to understand what's been going on.” Raven's tone was deceptively calm, her voice dictating those words wouldn't change our lives as I had hoped.

“Okay,” I responded cautiously.

Raven crawled back toward me. She lay next to me, facing away. I pulled her front against my back, perplexed. Her tranquility was so eerie I had no idea how to handle her.

“Milo,” Raven spoke in a soft voice. “I hoped not to tell you because I knew you’d either ask me to go to therapy or blame yourself. But if I don’t tell you, you’ll keep trying to find a way to fix me, and you can’t.”

Turning her over, I lay sideways to look at her face. “Tell me.”

Raven appeared nervous. “When I first moved to Paris, I stayed with my mom for a few weeks before moving out to room with girls from my internship. Mom was too busy with her parties and her life. It was the first time in my life I didn’t have Reid’s friendship. With everything that happened... he was the person I needed the most.” Raven glanced at me nervously.

“I get it,” I encouraged her to continue.

“I kept having these nightmares. I’d wake up every night, screaming—” Raven’s eyes darted back to my face.

“I’m not offended if the nightmares are about me. Talk to me.” We had to talk about her trauma, even if I was the man to cause it.

Raven bit her bottom lip. “I kept having the same nightmare... It was about the night before I left for Paris. It was about... what happened between us. I’d wake up and feel paralyzed like I was still trapped in the dream. Sometimes I’d dream that I climaxed. Other times I wouldn’t be able to tell if I was dreaming or if it was real.”

“Why that night?” I whispered. “It happened other times before that night and after you moved back. What made you have nightmares about that night specifically?”

Raven shrugged. “I guess it was the first time it truly wasn’t my choice. None of the other times felt as out of control as that night. Maybe it’s because I was younger. I don’t know. I just... it was when the concept of safety and trust felt eradicated. No matter what I do, I can’t shake the feeling away. It felt... violent between us.”

It was.

I figured the same. I saw the look of horror on Raven's face, and I knew everything was about to change. I waited for Raven to add more. When she didn't, I gently stroked her cheek. "I'm sorry. I feel like you are a part of me. I didn't understand you saw it differently. I wasn't trying—"

"I know," she said softly. "It took me a long time to understand how we perceived the same situation differently. I understand what happened between us, but I can't stop myself from reacting."

"You're right. You can't," I conceded, though I had no idea how to make things okay between us. "Tell me more. What happened after?"

Raven took a deep breath. "I-I was barely thinking straight when I left for Paris, and the nightmares kept getting worse. At the time, I still worked with the mentor from my internship, but I couldn't bear it if anyone in class so much as touched me during an assignment. I'd lash out if they did."

"Baby—"

"I ended up getting kicked out of my internship. Later, I spoke to my mentor. The remote internship was required to graduate high school and attend college at the Paris School of Fashion. My mentor took pity on me. He said if I got help, he would mark the internship as completed. So, I tried therapy, but it was counterproductive. I didn't want to talk about it, especially with someone I didn't know. Then Mia emailed me, asking to visit. She stuck by me that summer. Suddenly, I felt okay again. She was better than therapy."

"And after Mia left?"

"It was hard after Mia left," Raven admitted. "I didn't speak the language, and all the other relationships I had made were meaningless. I wanted to be around my family and counted the days until Mia's next break. She became my lifeline."

My throat was dry as realization dawned on me. "I took that away from you. I wouldn't let you see Mia anymore."

Rave gave me an awkward smile without verbally confirming.

I brushed her cheeks with my knuckles softly. “I know it was hard for you, but we can move forward from this. Do you want to go back to therapy?” Watching her reactions left little optimism for our relationship. That’s why we needed professional help. It was the only way we could be together.

Not surprisingly, Raven shook her head. “I tried it so many times. It only makes things worse.”

I nodded in understanding. For the entire Sinclair clan, therapy reminded us of Tessa’s on-and-off life of recovery. Though I researched it, I understood why Raven didn’t want to pursue that option again.

I pushed myself off the couch to stand. Raven followed me with her eyes as I paced the fireplace and made my way back. “If you couldn’t see Mia anymore, something else must have worked.”

“I received an email from a mutual friend group Reid and I shared,” Raven said. “They were tired of the feud between Reid and me. They wanted both of us to come on a trip to Costa Rica. Reid shockingly agreed, so we met again. After seeing Reid for the first time in years, we made up. It was my last true human connection. He pulled me out of that darkness.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.” Raven’s smile lit up her face. “For the last two years, he never stopped being my constant. I owe him my life for helping me turn it around. So, you have to understand why I couldn’t refuse when he asked me for something more.”

I had murderous urges when I discovered Raven was entertaining a relationship with Reid. I stooped low enough to threaten murder on my brother, but I didn’t consider the situation I’d put her in. I doused her life with fear, refusing to leave her alone until she promised to give us another chance.

All the while, Reid picked up the pieces of the consequences. My actions pushed her into his arms because he was the better man. Even I had to admit it.

I brushed some of the hair off of Raven's face. "I do understand," I admitted quietly. "You made all this progress because he helped you, but since you came back, you've been slipping."

I let the words sink in. Her ultimate trigger was and would always be—me. The thought of how my love destroyed her was ripping through me. The worst thing I did was loving her.

Was that why she kept hurting herself?

"Did you engage in self-harm before, or is that new?" I asked a little too quickly.

Raven's head snapped toward me, her head shaking vehemently.

"I-I... I-I'm not," she stammered before gaining control. "I'm not trying to hurt myself. It's a coping mechanism to keep myself centered and lucid, so I don't do anything stupid."

"Stupid, as in hurting me when you feel threatened?" I asked plainly. "You'll always view me as a threat, so you harm yourself to suppress the instinctive urge you feel about hurting me."

Raven would continue harming herself to stop the reflexive urges to hurt me. One day, she might go too far. She already came close last night. Just a couple of days ago, she tried to stab herself. It was clear as day—Raven was breaking.

"Milo," Raven's eyes widened. "That's not true. We were together last night. I didn't experience any symptoms afterward."

"That's because you experienced it beforehand," I said incredulously. "Raven, you went off the charts."

"So, I'm not allowed to be upset at the things you have done?" she asked angrily.

I rubbed my temples, trying to reel in my thoughts. "Of course you are, but last night was extreme. Not to mention, sometimes you experience symptoms, and sometimes you don't. It only needs to get out of control

once for you to hurt yourself. You've already been doing that. Raven, living without you feels like death for me. Watching you destroy yourself is the only thing worse than not being with you. Your nightmares. Your triggers —"

"Milo—"

"For God's sake, Rave. I'm causing you anxiety attacks. That decimates the bare minimum requirement to be in a relationship."

Raven cut me off with a hand on my cheek. "If we give it some time, things will change—"

"It's been four years, Rave. You healed. He healed you, and I'm destroying you."

My chest expanded at the persistent thought on my mind for days. Now I understood why they said shit like, If you love something, set it free.

In the end, that understanding didn't cross my mind out of concern over a taboo, forbidden relationship. Nor due to fear of our families or the stigma from society. It wasn't because of some stupid love triangle between brothers or other dramatic telenovela reasons. It stemmed from the agony of not finding an alternate solution that wouldn't destroy the woman I loved without giving her up.

In many ways, I fell in love with Raven more than before. I finally loved her more than I loved myself, enough to say the words I never thought possible. "I won't force you to seek professional help, but I'll let you go if being around me is destroying you. I'll do anything as long as you don't have to lose yourself."

Silence. Raven held on to me tightly as the suffocating silence engulfed the room, reflecting our truth. There was no acceptable answer or solution, so there could only be silence.



The room had been filled with pin-drop silence for minutes. The direction of this conversation was leading to something neither of us wanted to acknowledge. How could two people love each other this damn much, but it still wasn't enough?

Unbearable anguish had been battling inside me since the realization. It was wreaking havoc on my organs, mind, and heart. Our future seemed bleak, and I needed a better outcome, even if it was imaginary.

"I am going to marry you in the Greek Isles," I finally broke the silence. "You always wanted to visit Greece."

"Milo—"

"We could go to the Amalfi Coast afterward for our honeymoon. I went there once and always wanted to take you there."

"Why are you doing this?" she asked faintly.

I repositioned myself on the couch to spoon her with an arm around her waist.

"Humor me." I dropped my forehead against her shoulder blade. "You like imaginary worlds and hypothetical situations. Make one with me."

Raven stayed quiet. She drew lines with her fingers on my arm around her waist.

"Rave," I telepathically pleaded for her to give in.

"Maybe a sunset ceremony in Santorini," Raven sighed. "I've heard Santorini has the best sunsets in the world."

I kissed her temple, grateful she was going along with it. "We could return to New York after and redo my condo the way you like it."

I saw a frown forming. Raven was probably thinking about those color swatches again. "I have to tell you something," Raven said hesitantly. "I can't differentiate between egg-white, white, and off-white."

I laughed at her delayed honesty. “I know, baby. I asked you to choose between those three colors, and you circled the beige.”

Raven giggled, tugging at every single one of my heartstrings. “Fine. I will focus on my new business to become a huge success. You can become my trophy husband and redecorate the condo with as much egg-white or off-white as you please.”

“Hmm,” I contemplated. “I don’t know about that, but I will take a salary cut and hire someone for my travel-related responsibilities. I don’t have to be gone all the time.”

“Not bad,” Raven quipped. Then she said in a more dreamy voice, “After that, Dad’s license to practice medicine will be reinstated, and Mom will start a new line, which will become a success.”

“And Tessa will return to her old job,” I offered.

Raven smiled. “With my new successful business, I can help you take care of other expenses for our families. Then you don’t have to work so damn much.”

I nodded behind her. “We can finally start our lives together.”

“Tessa will start a new trial for a wonder drug that’ll cure her immediately.”

“Reid will find someone else to fall in love with, and he’ll forgive us both.”

“I’ll stop having nightmares.” Raven twisted her body to face me. “After that?”

“After that—” I leaned back to give her a broad smile, “—I’m going to knock you up.”

Raven’s mouth dropped open at my suggestion. “Oh, yeah?”

“Hell, yeah.”

“How many kids are we going to have?” Raven asked, lost in our world, one that wasn’t marred by our scars, our obligations, and the truth of our reality.

“Two,” I declared without hesitation. “A boy and a girl.”

From the side angle, I could see her scowl. “I barely want one. I can’t handle two.”

“You should always have a spare kid in case something happens to the first one.”

“You are so fucking morbid,” Raven mockingly gasped. “Did you just kill off one of our imaginary children?”

“I thought you only wanted one.” I tilted my face in confusion.

“Well, I didn’t want to kill the other one off. I was just going to give it away or leave it at the dumpster.”

Laughter ripped through my chest. “Both of our kids are going to look like me. They’ll be too good-looking to be dumpster babies.”

Raven turned and raised an eyebrow. “Excuse me. Both?”

“I don’t want no damn kids that look like vampire Snow White.” I glanced at her, voice thick with amusement.

“Vampire Snow White?” She bit her cheek to keep herself from laughing.

I shoot her a playful smile. “Do you want our kids to be so pale they look like the Flowers in the Attic children?”

“Oh, my God.” Raven gave out a huff, punching my arm around her waist. “You are so rude.”

“If they get your dark vampirine hair and pasty skin, our kids will be bullied mercilessly in school. We can’t have that. No. They should look like me.”

“If they look like you, then you can keep them,” she pouted. “I don’t want them.”

“You have to admit that I’m the looker in the family. Wouldn’t you want this,” I asked as I gestured toward my face and body with a hand wave, “for our children?”

“Shut up.” Raven laughed at our parallel future and turned her head to inspect my face, probably to find something she disliked about my physical attributes.

“It won’t happen, baby,” I assured.

“What won’t happen?”

“You won’t find anything you dislike about my pretty face.”

“You fucking narcissi—”

I cut her off by bringing my lips to hers. Pulling back, I gently bit her bottom lip. “So, baby, how did you like our world?”

“I don’t think I can live outside of it.” Raven brought her lips back to mine and moaned when our tongues collided.

I searched her eyes. “Are you sore? I was rough before—”

“I don’t care. I want you,” Raven whispered, the only motivation I needed.

This wasn’t one of the times for our animalistic lust. Somehow, she knew it, too. I entered gently and made her look at me while I fucked her slowly.

Raven held on to me and didn’t look away once. We both came staring at each other as if we could see through the other’s soul.

And it was fucking perfect in every fucking way.



Milo

I sensed Raven’s missing warmth before waking. A full stream of daylight greeted me through the patio doors. My muscles were sore as hell from last night and this morning, and I stumbled to the kitchen sink to wash off the dried blood on my face.

Groaning inwardly, I took stock of the place. We broke at least two lamps, along with many unwanted destructions. I pulled up my phone to open the Airbnb app, reserving the next two nights so I'd have time to hire a maid service to clean the mess. They could charge me for the remaining damages.

Once I finished getting dressed, I made my way home, only to find Raven's bedroom door wide open with a familiar scene in front. There were piles of clothes everywhere. The room looked like it had been ransacked and torn apart. However, it narrated a familiar tale. I had seen her room in this very condition.

There was an envelope with my name on it. The note was simple but telling. Raven left once more without saying goodbye.

*You lied.
-Raven*

Two Hours Ago



Raven

I was exhausted, both physically and mentally. Milo and I had sex, fell asleep, spoke, then put it on repeat.

I was sore by the time we had sex again, but I didn't care. I wanted the pain with pleasure. It was the perfect paradox for our type of love.

Except, it wasn't painful. It was gentle in a way I couldn't describe. It was the first and only time we had made love. Yes. We fucking made love instead of... well, fucking.

We stared at each other and said the words when we came, and it was perfect.

Milo touched my soul in a way I couldn't explain, and later, I watched him sleep for hours. He hated himself for hurting me because he never fully viewed what happened between us as wrong. None of that mattered anymore. The only thing to matter was an outcome that would allow us to move forward.

However, my hope vanished when I woke, thinking Milo was on top and choking me—that he was inside me. I looked around for help and turned my head, only to find the source of my horrors lying naked, wrapped around my body. Milo was fast asleep, exhausted from our night, and I kept thinking he'd wake up to turn my nightmares into a reality.

Deep down, I knew I loved Milo, but fear had a funny way of ruling over your other emotions. Every inch of my body screamed to grab the knife from the kitchen and stab him with it. Before these thoughts could take root, I stood on shaky legs. I had to make a fast exit before doing something impulsive or harmful.

I didn't know where Milo and I stood after last night. Our relationship's progression wasn't promising, but the idea of separating was causing an unfathomable type of agony. We created a parallel future and universe to give ourselves a happily ever after, one that might not be written in our stars. The truth was—I might not be the kind of mother we painted in that world. I'd be like Tessa, ruining my children's lives while a doting husband cared for me until the day he grew to resent me.

My love entailed wanting the best for Milo, with or without me. He deserved a partner who helped him lessen his burdens, not a partner who was one of the burdens he had to carry. If I couldn't be that partner for him, I'd let him go rather than drag him down.

I grabbed my jacket and dress off the floor. Sliding the patio door open, I stepped outside to feel the cool air.

When I returned to the Sinclair home, I faced Milo, my worst nightmare. I was also reminded of the selfless man who quietly cared for everyone, expecting nothing in return. I saw the man who diligently paid attention to

every one of my habits, and my interests. A person who made me feel like I was the center of their universe.

He was a good man who made some terrible mistakes. I understand that now. Nonetheless, I was happy to know I loved a good man, and I did. I loved him with all my heart.

How he made me feel... I never thought it was possible to feel that way about another person. It wasn't until I came back here did I realize I was missing a part of myself. It was ironic because the exact missing piece was the cause of my downfall. Irony and paradox always played a significant factor in our story.

In the end, Milo fell for a woman who was just like the mother he resented.

In the end, Raven fell in love with the man of her dreams, who was also her worse nightmare.

I stood in the cold, breathing in the fresh air. As the air cooled my flushed skin, I spied my phone lying motionless on the deck. I forgot about it last night, so it was left on the porch all night.

I grabbed my phone to find several missed calls from Reid, along with many texts asking me to call him back. There was even an email. Since my phone was almost dead, I rushed home instead of calling Reid. Marching to my room, I locked the door and plugged my charger into the phone. I sat to read the email first. It was a long one and, from the looks of it, eloquent.

Reid started the email by talking about how he couldn't remember a day when he wasn't in love with me. The first memory of his life was of me, not of his parents, not of his siblings, but a memory of me. The first memory etched on his mind was us eating chocolates in my bed when we were three years old. We weren't allowed to eat sugar, but we stole some from the pantry. I remembered because it was also my first memory.

Reid talked about the day we decided to call each other corny names: Stud and Beautiful. It started as a joke from a movie. Initially, we were acting cheesy, but soon it became abnormal not to address each other as such.

The email went on to discuss the day he caught me with Milo. It tore him up. It crushed him, and he didn't think he could recover. He explained how awful the visual was and the following moments when he had to watch me sleep in Milo's arms. It drove him to the painful decision to leave this house after Dad confirmed my concussion was mild.

I understood his decision. I wasn't sure why he was explaining himself. However, when I reached the last two paragraphs, his explanation connected.

I had to leave. I couldn't watch you with him. All this time, I thought you chose him over me. That was before Mia told me what happened. I am sorry. I am so, so sorry. I didn't know what he was doing to you. I had no idea what my brother was capable of. I can't believe Milo is so fucked up in the head. I should have seen it sooner. It all makes sense now why you suddenly left New York and why you didn't want to move back to that house. Please forgive me, Rave. I should have been the one to protect you. Instead, I left you there. Milo will pay for what he did. I will be there as soon as I can.

I love you,

Reid

I read the last two paragraphs three more times before the shock wore off.

Fuck, Mia. What have you done?

I tapped the call icon with shaky hands and fumbled with the phone. I finally took a deep breath. I had to be rational to deal with this and calm Reid down from whatever he planned to do.

I tapped the button to call him.

Reid picked up on the first ring.

ESSENTIAL

DRETHI ANIS

BOOK THREE OF THE QUARANTINE SERIES

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THE PAST - FALL 2015



Milo

I STOOD AT THE GATE OF RAVEN'S PRIVATE SCHOOL. MY GLARE WAS steadfast on the douchey, prepubescent boy talking to Raven—a pretty boy athlete with too much product in his hair.

He stared at Raven the way I had been staring at her for days. Like a locked-up, rage-filled wild animal. A beast rattling the cage to charge after his mate.

We had only just started sleeping together, and Raven had already lodged herself deep under my skin. If she was all I could think about, I might as well spend that time with her instead of inside a classroom. That was my rationale for skipping my remaining lectures today.

Raven loved it when I stopped by during her break. She had been skittish as of late, so I wanted to surprise her.

Except, I was the one in for a surprise. I bunked my lectures for a massive slap in the face. The royal fucker only pissed me off further by taking Raven's hands in his own.

“RAVEN!” I yelled, having reached past the behavior I’d sanction or tolerate.

Raven jumped at the pitch of my voice, turning to find me by the gate. Looking shocked, Raven retracted her hand from his hold and sprinted forward.

“Milo,” Raven breathed, “what are you doing here? Is everything okay?”

My glare was still fixed on that entitled prick, vision blurred with fury.

I couldn’t beat up this boy, I recited the reminder in my head over and over. As far as this school was concerned, I was the Sinclair family representative. Beating up a student was obviously not the best example to set.

Raven should have exercised better judgment by turning down his advances. This was precisely why I didn’t trust her anymore.

Instead of responding, I grabbed Raven’s elbow roughly and started walking past her school gate. I needed to remove myself from this situation before doing something I regretted.

“What’s going on?” Raven asked in a bewildered tone. When I didn’t respond, she followed up. “Milo, where are we going?”

Squeezing tightly, I forced Raven to match my pace. Fuck... I was going out of my mind. The fact I couldn’t read Raven anymore only added to my unraveling madness.

“Who was that boy?”

“What boy?”

I just caught her in an inconspicuous scene, holding some boy’s hand. I didn’t have a plethora of relationship experience. Still, if it were reversed, I’d at least attempt to explain the circumstances revolving around the situation than allowing her to doubt me.

“That boy, Raven,” I repeated harshly. “You two were holding hands.”

“I-I wasn’t holding hands,” Raven stammered. “That was Don. He asked for my history notes and grabbed my hand to plead for them. It was a joke.”

My jaw ticked. “We are going home. We’ll talk about it there.”

Going out to lunch was the last thing on my mind. At this point, the short walk home was grueling. When we reached the front door, I practically hauled her inside and started toward the stairs.

“Wait. What are you doing?” Raven protested.

“We are going to my room,” I stated firmly.

Raven shocked me by ripping her hand out of my hold. “It’s the middle of the day.”

“But no one’s home.” There was only one thing that could make things better between us right now. When else would we have this opportunity?

“I-I thought you wanted to talk, and that’s why you brought me home.”

“We’ll talk later. Let’s go upstairs.” I grabbed her elbow again.

This time Raven allowed me to lead her up the stairs. Thank God for it because I couldn’t see straight. My blood was pumping with impatience.

I had been too high-strung as of late. While I wasn’t a big drinker, perhaps I needed one to mellow myself out.

As soon as we stepped inside my room, I kicked my shoes off and headed to the mini-fridge to grab the glass sitting on top. There were airplane size vodka bottles stashed inside my fridge.

Raven dilly-dallied by the door, glancing uneasily at the Vodka Red bull I swirled in my glass. With every passing day, Raven acted more reluctant. I could feel her slipping away. It was like holding onto sand. The more I closed my fist, the more she slipped through my fingers.

“Are you going to come inside?” I asked in an agitated tone.

Raven was biting her tongue about something. She stepped inside and dropped her backpack on the armchair while fumbling with her coat and shoes.

When I tilted the glass, I caught a glimpse of her again through the clear bottom. I inhaled sharply when her shirt rose to reveal a patch of creamy skin and her small belly button.

Raven lingered by the armchair. I suddenly realized my agitation had made me impolite. Offering a drink seemed like the bare minimum of a polite gesture toward your 'lady friend,' especially if I had one. "Would you like a drink?" I asked belatedly.

Raven shrugged. "Sure, if you happen to have any wine in your room."

I barely suppressed the look of disdain or the urge to discipline her. "I meant a non-alcoholic drink, Raven."

"Oh. I'm okay. Thank you," Raven responded, though her eyes grew wide at my tone.

How the hell did she expect me to react? I might look the other way while Raven and Reid occasionally drank at parties, but how irresponsible would it be to feed an underaged teenager alcohol during school hours? Besides, her tone was too casual.

"Have you done that before? Drink during the school day?"

"Of course not."

"Then why did you automatically ask for alcohol?"

"I-I thought... y-you offered. I mean... I don't usually leave school in the middle of the day, either. I don't know what rules apply here."

I shook my head. She was right.

I refused to serve her alcohol, but I had no problem dragging her home during school hours to fulfill my salacious fantasies. It was a fine line playing the role of both a disciplinary figure and a spontaneous, fun-loving significant other. It was impossible.

I bet that prick from earlier could provide her with a normal relationship. He'd be a good old regular boyfriend. Take her out with her friends. Take her to school dances. Take her to prom.

Fuck! I forgot about prom.

Reid and Raven had been talking about their senior prom for years. I was also attending their prom, although it was to chaperone it. I couldn't take Raven. What then? She'd go with that prick, Chris?

Over my dead fucking body.

The homicidal urges returned at just the image, followed by that insatiable lust.

"Sit," my voice came out colder than intended. When Raven moved to sit on the couch, I pointedly added. "I meant, on the bed."

Raven halted in her tracks. She didn't respond, nor did she make a move toward the bed. I was quiet, too. I wanted to make demands. Then again, I needed her to choose me.

We were playing a game of chicken. The only noise was the ice cubes clinking in my glass. The tension rolled off my shoulders when Raven shuffled to the bed.

I grinned ear to ear. The smallest of her actions changed my temperament.

I downed whatever remained of my drink and strode toward her purposefully. Raven sat at the edge of my bed. Leaning down, I cupped her face and smashed my lips to hers. The buttons to Raven's school shirt fell open under my fingers. My hands roamed her body hungrily, feeling her shape, memorizing every curve.

Raven was doe-eyed as I lifted off her to pull my t-shirt over my head and ditch it on the floor. I'd laugh at her awed expression if I weren't so charmed by her innocence.

However enchanted I may be, it was tricky to maneuver a sexual relationship without any indication of Raven's preferences. I knew only one

thing for certain—she was incredibly shy in bed and preferred when I took charge, always looking at me for guidance.

“Undo my pants,” I murmured. Raven awkwardly unbuckled my belt and popped the buttons of my jeans. I kicked my jeans off, shoving them aside with my feet. “Boxers too.”

Raven pulled my boxers down to come eye level with my rock-hard cock that sprang out. By the time I stepped out of them, she was flushed.

“I love it when you touch me,” I whispered hoarsely when Raven peeked up.

I stroked her hair, hoping to soothe her. Her body visibly relaxed. Placing her palms on my thighs, I murmured, “Touch me, baby. Any way you want.”

Raven drew light circles on my thighs with her thumb. A low groan remained locked in my throat, not wanting any movement or sound to break the trance. When Raven’s fingers wrapped around the base of my cock, I could no longer hold back.

Raven gave me a long slow stroke, focusing on my dick lengthening in her hold. My head rolled back, hand reaching out to squeeze her perky tit, massaging her nipple through her bra. Raven stroked faster on instinct. Up and down, back and forth, until my cock was pulsing.

“That feels so good,” a low guttural sound vibrated from my chest.

Feeling encouraged, Raven leaned forward to close her lips around me, pressing her tongue on the head. I hissed when she twirled her tongue, but I needed a bit more from Raven today.

“Use your saliva,” I murmured. “Spread it more with your tongue. I want my dick dripping and wet. Yeah, lick me just like that.”

My eyes were captivated as Raven dove in, her head bobbing back and forth. It was sweet fucking heaven welcoming me inside.

“That’s it, baby. Suck me harder,” I instructed between my growls. “Fuuuck. I want your mouth on my balls too.” Raven didn’t hesitate, licking and alternating from one to the other. I moved her other hand to my balls. “Squeeze them a little.”

Raven cupped me on cue, just the way I liked. She opened up more until my ball was inside her wet, warm mouth, and she was lapping without holding back.

I fucking lost it.

“Fuck, yeah,” I panted. “Don’t stop.” I made a fist into her hair, roaring and grunting uncontrollably. “Fuck, baby. That... right there... feels so fucking good. Fuck... holy fuck. You are killing me,” I growled like a madman.

Raven moved her mouth back to my cock. She sucked me off. Stroking me. Cupping my balls. I stared in awe, feeling consumed. Raven gave amazing head. Despite her reserved manners, she hit every spot, giving me exactly what I needed.

At this rate, I wasn’t going to last.

I moved her mouth off me. I wanted to come inside her. My lips were on hers as soon as I pushed her back on the mattress and covered my body with hers. My frantic hands pulled at her skirt and underwear, almost ripping them in my effort to take them all off.

I ran my tongue over her pink areola. Closing my mouth around her nipple, I sucked gently at first, rougher as I continued. Raven clutched at my shoulders, letting out a pained whimper.

“Relax, baby,” I mumbled against her nipple while distracting her by parting her folds.

Raven moaned and gasped simultaneously as I stroked her clit while scraping my teeth to cover her breasts with bite marks. I had no idea why biting turned her on so much. By the time her breasts were red and bruised, my fingers were coated with her wetness.

I looked down at her swollen cunt. Sliding my tip between her folds, I sheathed myself inside, roughly.

Pure ecstasy burst through my chest as her walls embraced me, Raven's hold clawing at my dick. "Does it still hurt?" I gritted out since Raven was sore last night.

"A little." Raven blew out a breath. "Ahhh." Another small whimper escaped Raven when I rocked against her, hugging her close. Her nails dug into my shoulders, no doubt leaving me with more marks as a souvenir.

Holy hell, this was torture. I had been dying to be rougher with Raven. I might have to distract her in order to take her the way my body craved. The way I had been fantasizing about for years.

"Let me fuck you harder," I whispered, hoping not to push her limits. "Can you do that for me, baby? I know it hurts, only I can't help myself. You are just so sexy."

Raven nodded, blushing incessantly. I picked up the pace, unable to think past coming deep inside her little pussy. I only slowed when Raven's face clenched in pain.

"Just a little bit longer," I grunted with excruciating effort. "I'm so close. Gonna lose my mind if I can't fuck you raw right now."

"I'm fine," she breathed, biting down on her pouty bottom lip.

"God, Rave. You are perfect." I dug my fingers into her hips to hold her down while I ground and thrust. My hand moved under one of her knees to lift her thigh and go deeper, pushing inside her harder. Raven tightened around my cock again, setting me off.

"I'm gonna come... fuck... I'm coming," I growled. "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!"

My body exploded as my lips swooshed down to hers. My world blacked out as wave after wave crashed through, and my dick kept slamming inside her repeatedly, coming violently.

My muscles gave out. I collapsed on top of Raven as I pulled out. Peeking my eyes open, I pressed a kiss on Raven's neck. My chest expanded when I saw the bruises covering her breasts. I dragged my lips over all the injuries to somehow erase their existence.

"You're amazing in bed," I praised in-between kisses.

"What?" Raven appeared startled by the compliment.

Moments of doubt seeped through. I was baffled by Raven. A compliment in the bedroom was generally well-received, but I could never tell with her.

"You are amazing in bed," I repeated, which somehow felt like doubling down on a bad bet. "I was close to having a heart attack," I joked.

Raven didn't seem pleased by my answer. "Why did you come to my school today?" she posed the question under her breath instead of acknowledging my words. Raven used to get giddy whenever I visited her at school during lunch hour. I guess not anymore.

"Because I couldn't stop thinking about last night," I answered. "If I couldn't focus on class, I might as well see you instead of dreaming about this."

Raven blinked. "Oh," she said, sounding almost... disappointed?

I leaned back to study her expression. There was no glow on her face, the kind she usually wore for me. Instead of harping on the negative, I led with the only thing that worked for us: sex. It overpowered everything.

Soon, I had my head buried between her legs, making her forget a second of pain from when I was too rough. She screamed her head off, begging desperately.

After her throbbing pussy cooled off, I absentmindedly ran my hands all over her silky, smooth skin, my face lazily tucked away in the hollow of her neck.

"I have to go back to school," Raven mumbled, the lethargy reflected on her face.

“Stay. I’ll write you a note.”

“Can’t. I have an important class—”

“Which class?”

“History?”

“The one with that boy in it?” When Raven didn’t respond, I said, “Nothing will happen if you miss a day.” I was aware of my negligence, but I couldn’t think straight with her in my arms.

“I guess. Okay. Write me a note.” Raven yawned, her eyelids fluttering, lulling herself to sleep from the gentle kisses I pressed all over her face. I’d never get tired of this visual.

As long as Raven was by my side, I’d want to live forever so I could spend all of it with her. In fact, she made me want to live longer than infinity. If I could be with her until the end of the world, I’d tell death to go fuck itself every time.

PART ONE

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SPRING

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CHAPTER I

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A YEAR WITHOUT YOU - SPRING 2020



Note the structure of this book is different. The third book is an extended epilogue for Milo & Raven, allowing readers to explore their tumultuous relationship. Hence, this book is divided into four parts, embodying their lives through four seasons over two years. Each part begins with one chapter representing the past and follows their journey for the same season in the following year.



Mia

HAVE YOU EVER FORCED YOURSELF ON ANYONE ELSE OTHER THAN ME? I had been up all night contemplating the pain and the sincerity behind the words I overheard Raven utter last night.

Over the last few weeks, Raven had been spending a lot of time with Milo — smiling, making googly eyes. Yet, she had been looking more deathly with each passing day—weight loss, restlessness, dark circles. When I saw evidence of self-inflicted harm, I decided to break my silence. I went to Milo’s room yesterday to express my concerns. I never made it past his

door, stumped by Raven's words of admission. Then I understood where the changes came from.

Raven's well-being was dependent on removing the ghosts of her past. Whereas Milo's well-being was dependent on Raven. The changes in his recent appearance proved he was only happy around her, while the changes in Raven's appearance proved she wasn't okay around him.

Fuck. I wished I had said something sooner. I was too distracted by my relief at Milo and Raven's reunion.

Like a duckling, I had imprinted on Milo within days of my birth and saw him as my parent. However, over the years, Milo's work had become taxing. Whenever he was indisposed, Milo would leave me under Dad's care. The arrangement exasperated him as Dad often neglected Milo's instructions—screen time, curfew, etc. So, Milo sent me to Paris during my vacations and long weekends, which added up to five months of the year. The significant time under Raven's supervision morphed our dynamic, and she became a second parental figure.

However, my two parental representations refused to be in the same room, turning holidays and special occasions into sore spots. I had spent years feeling like a child of divorce.

So, imagine my surprise when I followed Milo's directions to gather the family on the day everyone moved back to this house, only so they could catch Milo and Raven in a conspicuous act. Then he pretended it was a mistake they got caught.

I planned to confront him privately, but various family crises kept popping up, like Raven falling down the stairs, Reid leaving, and Tessa spiraling. Later, Raven and Milo's relationship seemed genuine, so I let it go.

I knew Raven was lying to me about their relationship when they first got together. It was darn hard to miss an affair between a sexually charged human lacking healthy relationship experiences and a nonsexual being lacking communication skills.

To Milo, allowing a girl to sleep in his room was equivalent to professing his undying devotion. I wondered if it registered that sex didn't translate to love for a nonsexual person like Raven. And I'd bet Raven never articulated a word. If Milo had led with his emotive side or if she were more vocal, perhaps things would've been different for them.

Raven used to light up whenever Milo was in the vicinity. After they started sleeping together, not so much. In return, I noticed Milo's feeble attempts to salvage the deterioration. The more Raven pulled back, the more he boxed her in. The more Milo boxed her in, the more she pulled back. A slow-motion train wreck. With their callous attempts at secrecy, the word was prone to get out. I could only imagine the gossip.

Privileged foster dad of Upper West Side fucks adopted daughter behind closed doors.

Monumental misuse of power: Man uses authoritative position to coerce underage girl.

Their names would've been dragged through the mud, and people in our cliques didn't take kindly to social pariahs. On top of losing custody of Raven, Milo's career would've ended before starting. If they were in love, perhaps the risk would've made sense. Except, Raven wasn't in love, and Milo wasn't happy, either. The peril to their bright futures had only one solution—Raven and Milo had to break up.

"Mia, why are you sitting here by yourself?" I looked up from the kitchen table to find Milo walking through the screen door.

"What did you do to Raven?" I blurted, jumping out of my chair.

Milo narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Did you force yourself on Raven?" I didn't want to believe it.

"Excuse me?" Milo appeared shocked by my sudden attack.

I should have stuck to the rehearsed spiel and spoken lovingly about getting help. Instead, my emotions deconstructed my thoughts and left me rambling

with impulsive words. “Don’t bother denying it. I heard her. Raven’s not doing well, and you are the reason why. Stay the hell away from her.”

Milo narrowed his eyes, his confusion turning into anger as I made my terrible accusations. He suddenly dropped the charade. The manifestation happened in front of my very eyes. I had never seen such lethal fury in his eyes. “That’s never going to happen,” he said in an eerie tone, making me recoil. “What’s between us is none of your goddamn business. You’re just a kid.”

“If I am a kid, then she was, too, when it happened,” I spat out in disgust. “I’ve heard Raven crying out in her sleep, asking for someone to stop. I just didn’t know it was you. You need to stay away from her. Look at her; she looks like death.”

Milo closed his eyes. “Mia, stay out of it.”

“You have to repent for your sins,” I hissed, earning me an eye roll. Milo might not believe in God, but his soul would burn in eternal damnation if he didn’t seek redemption.

“Whatever, Mia,” Milo huffed in annoyance. “This is a pointless discussion because no one will come between us. The only reason Raven listened to you the first time is because you confused her. She won’t listen to you again.”

Again?! Did Milo know I advised Raven to break off their previous entanglement?

“That’s not true,” I approached cautiously. “Raven listens to me because I’ve been in her life since the day I was born, and unlike everyone else, I have never turned my back on her.”

Milo managed to lower his voice, though it shook with madness. “Mia, if you do anything to jeopardize my relationship, I’ll kick you out of this house, and you’ll never see another penny from me. Call it disowned or whatever the hell you want.”

“You think I’ll let you do whatever you want in exchange for money and a roof over my head?” I asked in disbelief.

Deep down, I knew we were both agitated, saying things we didn’t mean. It was the Sinclair gene; we got blindsided by rage. Milo, despite his dependable nature, was overreacting, too. That was why Raven played a crucial role as the perpetual peacemaker. Without her presence, there was no one to diffuse Milo’s unraveling or my volcanic fury. “Fine, go ahead. Disown me.”

“Suit yourself.” With those words, Milo headed toward the door.

Clearly, I shouldn’t goad Milo in his current mood, but I merely needed a verbal commitment to guarantee Raven’s safety.

“You can deny it, but you know that Raven heeds my opinions,” I declared. “Trust me. Raven will break things off with you if I ask her to.”

The moment I said those words, Milo’s head whipped in my direction. Milo had always been a disciplinary parental figure; never cruel. However, I felt his oncoming wrath because he knew Raven would choose me if it came down to it. “What did you just say?” he bellowed. There was something else there, too—Fear. Milo was petrified at the idea of losing Raven. “Raven won’t listen to a single word you have to say.”

Instead of backing away, I doubled down. Our conversation escalated so fast that I regretted the words before opening my mouth. “You think so? Raven’s so paranoid about me that she doesn’t even swear things on me. That’s because she wants to protect me above all else. The feeling’s mutual. I’d do anything to protect her, even if it’s from you. Stay away from her, or you’ll never see her again because if I force her to pick between the two of us, Raven will choose her baby sister over the man who raped her.”

The air around us turned into ice. That was the moment I knew something awful was about to happen, and it did. Milo lost it. One moment, he was standing next to the kitchen door. The next, he was in front of me, grabbing my throat.

I didn't move for a shell-shocked second until I felt lightheaded. Realizing I couldn't breathe, I scratched Milo's hand to pry it off my neck. Except, Milo was gone and there was someone else inside, his expression dark like a nightmare.

Suddenly, Milo snapped out of the blackout and let go; horrification painted on his mien. We stared at one another in utter shock and bewilderment. A seemingly heated fight between siblings spiraled to a summit neither of us imagined possible.

"Oh, my God, Mia!" Milo sounded stunned. He put his hands over his head, looking baffled. "Fuck! I am sorry. I didn't mean to do that."

It was too late for apologies. Heavy disappointment had already engulfed my chest, along with fear. Had Milo been hurting Raven as well? Is that why she looked awful? I grabbed my neck with my hand.

"I'm sorry," Milo tried to console. "I-I really don't know... what just happened." Milo stepped toward me, but I took one step backward, knocking the chair on the floor. Tears welled up in my eyes, though I refused to let them fall.

Stumbling on my left foot, I ran. My destination: the stairs to Raven's room.



"Hey." Raven rose from the bed, looking concerned. I didn't say a single word. Instead, I engulfed Raven into an embrace while covering any bruise with the collar of my sweater.

"Mia, is everything okay?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah, I have just been so worried about you," I whispered truthfully.

The tears finally started flowing, streaming down my cheeks. Oh, God, Milo's brain set off at the threat of losing Raven, and he attacked me like it was second nature. It brought up the most terrifying ideas.

What if he goes too far one day? What if he kills Raven one day in his reactive anger?

If that was what Milo did for threatening to take Raven away, what must he have been doing to her all this time? As Raven hugged me in hopes of consoling me, I caught her wrist in my hand to observe the angry red marks.

Was it self-harm or the aftermath of Milo's anger?

A realization dawned on me. Milo should go to jail. Not only to repent but to confine himself until getting over this insanity. Raven was in danger except she didn't see it. Milo knew he was dangerous for Raven, but he didn't care.

At the very least, I had to make Raven open her eyes.

"You don't owe Milo anything. If you want to come forward, I'll be there. I'll support you."

"Mia," she warned me sternly, "you have no idea what you are talking about."

"Just because he signed some papers to be your guardian doesn't give him the right—"

"I don't know what you think you know, but—"

"You don't have to protect him."

"I'm not protecting anyone."

"Just stop talking. You sound ridiculous and confused. How can you think so little of your brother?"

"I'm not confused. I suspected something was wrong, then I overheard you guys."

"You heard wrong."

"I did not. You're in denial, which would be fine if the situation weren't unsafe for you."

“Why would the situation be unsafe for me?”

“Because Raven, Milo rape—”

“STOP!” Raven shrieked at the top of her lungs.

I stepped forward for a last-ditch effort, but just like Milo, Raven refused to acknowledge the facts. She pushed past me to run out of the house, leaving me in tears and one orbiting thought. They are both my heroes, but they are each other’s villains.



I finally stopped crying when I found Milo standing at Raven’s doorframe. “Mia,” he said carefully. “I went to your room looking for you. Are you okay?” When I didn’t respond, Milo added, “Mia, I-I don’t know what happened downstairs... I shouldn’t have done that. I’m sorry I lost my temper. You know how much I love you, right?”

I glared at him. “Is that how you justify it to Raven when you do this to her?”

Milo closed his eyes. “Mia, adult relationships are complicated. Raven and I have a difficult past, but you have to stay out of it. Okay, Rabbit?”

“If she wants to be with you, why the hell does it matter what I have to say to her?”

Milo quickly scanned the room. “Did you already say something to Raven?” My silence confirmed the answer. Milo rubbed his temple with two fingers. “Where is she now?”

“I don’t know,” I muttered under my breath.

Panic ensued when I heard Milo’s footsteps descending the stairs and exiting the house, gathering he was likely going after Raven. Was leaving unannounced a punishable offense in his mind?

I felt like a scared little child. I was lost. If I couldn't rely on my usual moral compass to guide me, there was only one other family member I trusted.

I took out my phone to send Reid a text.

Mia: I know you are ignoring everyone, but please call me. It's a 911.

As soon as Reid called me, I poured my heart out.

Earlier, I omitted to Raven about Milo choking me. It was one thing for Milo to hurt Raven. If she found out Milo had laid a finger on her... I didn't know if we needed both parties to turn violent.

Nevertheless, I spilled the details to Reid to establish the urgency. His fury instantly caused me to double-guess my decision. He was in Baltimore but assured me he'd drive here as soon as the nearest car rental opened.

Unsure what to do next, I remained seated on Raven's floor.

"Mia, are you okay?"

I looked up. Pale blue eyes. Mussed up inky black hair. Strong set jaw. Generous lips. The most beautiful male specimen, even in a casual gray T-shirt and blue jeans.

Brandon fucking Cooper was towering over me. His gaze zeroed in when I didn't respond. I turned away in mortification as I was a complete mess.

"Hey, what's wrong?" To my horror, Brandon stepped inside Raven's room, gently closing the door behind him.

I wiped my tears away. "Nothing."

Brandon crouched next to me. "It's obviously something if you're crying about it. You are not even doing it in the right room. You know this is Raven's room, right?" he teased. "I thought teenage girls throw themselves on their own beds after slamming the door behind them."

"We are not all so dramatic." I wiped my face again as more tears fell.

Suddenly, Brandon grabbed me into a hug. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“I can’t. This isn’t about me,” I replied tersely. Whatever happened between the four of us always stayed within our tight-knit clique.

“If it’s not about you, then why are you so upset?”

“Because sometimes we care more about other people than we care about ourselves.”

Brandon was quiet for a few minutes. Then he said, “Why do you always have to act like such a grown-up, Bunny? It makes me forget that you are only seventeen.”

Milo used to affectionately call me Rabbit because I had an overbite. He later got me braces to fix the problem. However, Brandon told me I shouldn’t fix it because my overbite gave me character. In fact, my adorable overbite deserved an even cuter name.

Brandon went on to call me Bunny because it was more endearing than Rabbit. At the time, he was three times my age. Even then, I knew I wanted him. He was my first crush—the only man I have ever been interested in. It had been torture since he moved in with us. I had realized the attraction was mutual and had exercised insurmountable willpower to stay away.

I had no intention of pursuing Brandon because you couldn’t build new relationships by destroying old ones. Just look at Milo and Raven.

Milo would ruin Brandon if anything ever happened. Now that I knew of Raven’s past, I understood why she was so protective of me. Brandon epitomized her worst fear—an older man in a position of power. She’d hit rock bottom if at least one kid didn’t leave this house unscathed.

“In that case, I should head back to my room and throw myself on my bed after slamming the door,” I joked. “Thank you for the consoling.”

“Mia, stop.” Brandon’s hold on me tightened as I tried to stand. “Something obviously happened. I have never seen you like this. Is this about college again?”

“That doesn’t matter right now,” I whispered hoarsely.

“Of course it does. Mia, you have the right to choose your own path. I hope you know that. Your unhealthy bond with Milo and Raven is clearly affecting the rest of your life.”

“There were times when we wouldn’t see our parents for months on end,” I reminded him. “When you grow up like that, it becomes an us against the world mentality. Wanting to protect and wanting the best for one another becomes second nature—a habit.”

“A habit?” Brandon scoffed. “It’s downright weird that you guys meddle in each other’s business so much and invade one another’s privacy without any regard. Raven has your calendar synced to her phone. Milo has a chart hung up in his work-study with your life plan on it.”

Milo mapped out my life through aptitude tests. Yale for undergraduate. Doctorate at Stanford. A published psychologist by thirty. None of which I cared to pursue.

“Look, I once lived in Mumbai for a study exchange program. It was twelve people in one household. They called it a joint family. They were less codependent than you four.”

I burst out laughing despite my tears, which only made Brandon blow out a defeated breath. “Saying that we are codependent is putting it mildly,” I admitted warily.

“Well, if you know it’s abnormal, then why do you participate?”

“What do you suggest that I do?”

“Perhaps start by cutting that umbilical cord with Milo.”

“I doubt Milo and I will be very close moving forward,” I mumbled.

Brandon’s eyes suddenly flashed with anger. “Mia, what happened to your neck?”

I reached out to touch my neck, where a bruise was likely starting to form. “Nothing.”

“Mia—” He warned with bark in his tone.

“Brandon, it’s okay,” I cut him off to reassure him. “Don’t worry about me.”

Brandon’s hold on me only tightened in response. Something inside me broke at his determined face, resolute to make it all better.

My world stopped when Brandon looked down at me. He was mere inches away, eyes never deviating from mine, looking at me like no man before. The hunger was palpable in his heavy-lidded eyes and dilated pupils fixed on my mouth. His body matched the carnal desire in his orbs. Heavier exhalations. Erratic breathing. The rhythmic movement of his chest.

The first time Brandon looked at me like I was a woman instead of a little girl, it surprised me. Since then, his glances had morphed into something different. Desire.

For the sake of my family, I disregarded it. However, in this unmistakably vulnerable moment, I had no more remaining willpower.

We stared at one another, a hair’s breadth apart. Before Brandon could open his mouth, I collided my lips against his. Brandon stiffened in shock, his hand fisting into my hair. When our tongues tangled, he circled one arm around my waist and moved me to straddle him. We moaned at the same time before Brandon swung me to the ground, and I practically ripped his shirt off.

The Next Day



Raven

Please forgive me, Rave. I should have been the one to protect you. Instead, I left you there. Milo will pay for what he did. I will be there as soon as I can.

I love you,

Reid

With shaky hands, I tapped the call icon and fumbled with the phone. Reid picked up on the very first ring.

“Thank God, Raven,” Reid’s voice boomed from the phone so loud I had to move it away. “I have been calling for hours!”

“Umm... hey, Stud. S-Sorry, I was out—”

“Fuck! Are you okay?”

“Reid, I am fi—”

“Rave, this call might drop. I lost my charger, and my phone’s almost dead. I’m driving and should be there in thirty minutes. I have been searching for attorneys on how to proceed—”

“No!” I shrieked. “Reid, have you lost your damn mind?”

“Fuck. When I first saw you two together all those years ago... I don’t know what I saw. I just thought... I had no idea he was forcing you and getting violent. I’m researching how to file a restraining order. I’ll have money to pay for the lawyer when my trust fund kicks—”

“Reid,” I screamed to cut him off. I should have saved my breath. Reid’s temper was in full swing, and he wasn’t listening. I momentarily gave up, letting him rant, already aware there was nothing he could say to change how I felt about Milo.

Milo and I spent the night wondering if an unsure relationship like ours could work. A few hours ago, I woke up paralyzed with fear because Milo was both the man of my dreams and the man from my nightmares. Yet, all of me still belonged to him.

When Milo made love to me, my very soul was wrenched out of my body. We became one, connected in a way I had never experienced with another human being. It was the moment I truly became his in every sense of the word.

I once read a book about the five love languages and how everyone defined love differently. It didn't take a genius to figure out Milo's love language was physical touch, and I needed quality time outside of the bedroom.

Over the weeks, Milo phrased the same question a few times, Did I love him when we first got together? When Milo and I first started sleeping together, my heart held back because I couldn't connect with Milo's physically dependent form of romance, nor could I define it as love. Life brought us back together again. This time, Milo gave me all of himself. He finally put away the physical aspect of our relationship to let me see his emotional side. He nurtured our bond in the most boring way possible—my way. No sex. Quality time. Conversations. Romance. Who would have thought Milo Sinclair could spend time wooing a woman?

Now, he got me just as hooked on the physical component because sex with someone you love was more mind-blowing than any other experience.

"We should also call the cops," Reid's one-sided rant continued, threatening the very thing I loved the most in this world. "It might be safer for Milo if he goes to jail. I am going to beat the shit out of him. You don't have to be scared of him anymore, Rave."

"Listen, Stud," I muttered, holding my temple with two fingers. "There has been a huge misunderstanding. I need you to take a deep breath." Perhaps I could calm Reid down by redirecting his focus with specific questions. "Reid, you just said you are driving to New York. Where have you been?"

"Baltimore, Maryland," he replied with some hesitation. "It's a long story. I'll explain later. I am just so sorry I left you behind," he added in a whisper.

"W-What exactly did Mia tell you?"

"Mia overheard Milo admitting to what he did to you. She tried talking to you, but you didn't want to hear it. Milo was livid when he found out you had left. Please don't be mad at Mia. She was scared he might hurt you again. She'd never betray your trust otherwise."

“Of course, I’m not mad at Mia,” I whispered. “Reid, just tell me everything she said.”

“Milo texted Mia the day he came home to gather everyone to come to see him. That’s when we caught you two together. She went to talk to him about it and overheard Milo talking about how he forced himself on you,” Reid’s voice shook. “Rave, this is all my fault. I texted Milo that I wanted to be with you. He forced himself on you to stake his claim before we could become more.”

There it was. The whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

“Reid, can I—”

“Do you need a minute?” he cut me off to offer me the reprieve. “Just mute me. I am right here when you’re ready.”

I muted Reid to contemplate how I was going to kick Milo’s ass. I was ready to bring back my wrath from last night. No man had made me feel this violent. Milo straight-up lied to my face. I’d take a bullet for him, but he fucked over Reid by fucking me.

Despite his stupid antics, I had already suspected Milo had lied to me. Did this really change anything?

At 6:58 a.m., Reid confirmed my suspicions. It was 7 a.m. now. Did I love Milo any less in the last two minutes since learning this information?

I took a mental inventory as a bitter smile formed on my lips. I did not. While I planned to take a bat to that beautiful liar’s kneecaps for fibbing, I still loved the bastard.

I told Milo I wouldn’t be able to deal with it if he broke my trust again. I understood why he felt cornered. I spoke out of emotions; the truth was nothing could keep me from him after what we experienced last night. So, I had to put aside our lover’s quarrel over his lie by omission. We had more pressing matters. I had to act fast to put a stop to this nonsense Reid was suggesting.

I stripped off my clothes and wrapped a towel around myself. I had to end this call, take a shower, and change. Once Reid arrived, we'd take a walk to sort this out privately.

I turned on the hot water in the bathroom and unmuted the phone. "I'm back."

"Talk to me," Reid said immediately. "Are you okay?"

I fell in love and slept with the man I loved. To me, the situation was simple. Reid wouldn't see it that way. So, I must admit to small truths to conceal the worst lies.

"I didn't know Milo texted Mia to expose us. I asked him, and he lied to my face. I am upset, but—"

"Raven, I am going to stop you right there. If you are not ready to talk about what happened, I understand. Take all the time you need, but don't keep lying to me," Reid spoke as though he had already made up his mind. "In the meanwhile, pack a bag. I'm not letting you live in the same house as him. Come stay with me in Baltimore."

"Reid, there is something—" Beep. I pulled the phone away to see if he had hung up. I dialed back, no response. His phone had died. Fuck.

The biggest problem with Reid's accusation lay in Milo and I having sex while I was under his care. Reid was a witness to it. If he thought it was against my will, he might not take too kindly about overlooking the underaged portion.

If that were the case, it wouldn't matter if I refused to press charges. The state could file charges against him. I searched on my phone for the age of consent in various states where we had sex.

Besides New York, we also had sex in Delaware and New Jersey. Milo rented a car during my senior year to visit those states for a family reunion. While Mia and Reid were busy catching up with their cousins, Milo snuck us away for a quickie in the backseat of the car.

I didn't know if Reid saw us then. He never gave me details about the time he caught us. And I had no idea of the law against sleeping with someone under your care. Was it the same as a foster parent having sex with their foster child?

God! How did we get here?

None of the pages were downloading. My phone barely got signal in this room. The data connection was slow, and Milo never gave me the Wi-Fi password to connect it to my new phone.

I tried searching for the age of consent when someone turned the knob to my bedroom door.

"Rave, open up."

Reid.

"Hey, Stud!" I barely turned the lock before throwing my arms around him.

Reid quietly pried me off him. His eyes studied me intently as they trailed over my body.

I was wrapped in nothing but a towel. However, Reid wasn't checking me out. He was frowning, downright furious.

My eyes darted to the full-length mirror on my closet door.

I had dark circles under my eyes from lack of sleep. My recent weight loss was making my small frame seem anorexic. I had also skipped my vitamins. My immune system was at an all-time low, and I bruised easier when that happened. The fact Milo and I had hours of rough sex last night, leaving purple bruises on my legs, arms, and shoulders, was only making matters worse.

Love was blind. That's probably why Milo looked at me like I was the most beautiful woman on this planet. He said those things so often I started to see myself through his eyes. Now that I saw myself from the horror reflected in Reid's eyes, the reality was different.

This looked bad considering the conversation we had and whatever the hell Mia told Reid. What was simply an oversight of proper health management was causing unfathomable anger in Reid.

“What the fuck did he do?” Reid roared.

I sprinted to the door and closed it so no one would hear him. “Nothing.”

“I am going to kill him,” Reid tried to skate past me, yet I stood firm.

“Reid, you need to calm down. Milo didn’t do this,” I said confidently.

“Pack your weekender bag. I can’t control my anger right now, Rave. Either you leave with me, or I am telling everyone about what he did. Then I am going to have it out with him.”

“For fuck’s sake, Reid,” I snapped, then rolled out my lie. “This is all a misunderstanding. I was teasing him about how the only way he could get it in was by force. It was a bad joke. Mia overheard us and freaked.”

Reid narrowed his eyes. “What is wrong with you? He is out of control. He even put his hands on Mia. Milo tried to choke her.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? Of course, he didn’t,” I hissed. I couldn’t believe Reid would lie about something so serious. “He would never do that.”

“He did,” Reid gritted out. “That’s why Mia called me. She was scared out of her mind.”

“Enough!” I made a clearing motion in the air. “How can you say these things about Milo, of all people? He practically raised you. How many brothers do you know would give up their childhood to provide their siblings with a better one? This is the thanks he gets, with everyone ganging up against him? I am not listening to this shit anymore.”

Reid looked at me like I was insane. “You just admitted Milo lied to you. Why are you still protecting him? Aren’t you angry over what he did?”

“Of course, I’m angry,” I lifted my chin defiantly. “I plan to have it out with Milo, but I’m not going to accuse him of crazy shit just for lying to me. I’m

not protecting him. It's the truth."

Reid's eyes turned to slits as a decision flickered in them. "Okay. In that case, swear it on Mia. Swear on Mia that Milo didn't do this." His finger gently touched my bruised cheek, sporting Milo's fingerprints. "And swear on Mia that Milo has never forced you to have sex with him against your will," Reid said, the words meant to stupefy me in place, and they did.

Check. Fucking. Mate.



I wasn't a religious person by any means, nor did I pray to some non-existent god. However, I was superstitious about one thing: Mia.

Reid knew it, too. Frankly, it was low and hitting below the belt.

"That's what I thought," Reid broke the angry silence between us. He walked past me to grab my weekend bag out of the closet. Reid started throwing clothes into my bag.

I didn't move. "Okay, you win," I conceded. "I'm going to take a quick shower before we leave."

Reid gave me a curt nod.

Leaving with Reid might be the safest option. No words needed to be exchanged between Milo, Reid, or our parents. No fighting. No theatrics. No cops or lawyers. All of this could be accomplished if I could get him the hell out of here.

Baltimore was only a few hours away. I could take the train back tomorrow.

Let's also not forget about my boyfriend's possessive streak. When Milo finds out, he'd probably rent a car and drive to Baltimore. I might be back by tonight.

Perhaps Milo and I should move to his condo. After discussing the hurdles in our relationship, I was unsure of Milo's stance, but I hoped he agreed. We

needed space from our families to figure shit out. It was abundantly clear that Reid and Mia were ready to go on a strike against our relationship.

I shut the bathroom door to send Milo a few text messages to explain.

Rave: I'll be back as soon as I can. I'll text you Reid's address when I get there. If you are feeling antsy, come to Baltimore before doing anything hasty. I love you. -xoxo

After the quickest shower known to mankind, I grabbed a pair of leggings and a sweater. By the time I dressed and opened the bathroom door, Reid was writing on an envelope on my desk.

I stared at the pen as he twirled it between his fingers. "What are you doing?"

"Just leaving a note for Mia. I told her I'd take you with me. I'm leaving her a note in your handwriting so she knows you haven't been kidnapped against your will."

I cracked a smile at that. "By all means, knock yourself out." Reid and I knew how to mimic each other's handwriting.

When Reid was done packing, I grabbed the bag to chuck my toiletries inside. And that's when I was finally close enough to see Reid properly for the first time today.

He wasn't looking so hot, either. His usual handsome face was sunken. His bright blue eyes had lost their spark and had the same dark circles I sported. He had lost some weight and muscle mass as well.

"Reid, you look like shit," I commented softly. "I told you not to drink so much."

"I am fine," Reid said noncommittally.

"Damnit, Reid! Are you doing coke again?"

When I was in Paris, I heard Reid was doing cocaine at parties. After we mended our bond, I made him promise never to do it again. I'd lock him up and throw away the keys if he digressed.

“No,” he replied curtly. I made a mental note to circle back to this conversation. “Where is your charger?” he asked.

Reid stuffed my large shoulder purse with the contents I’d generally take. It was eerie how well we knew each other. I surrendered my phone and charger to him to pack.

“Ready to go?” he asked impatiently, handing me the purse.

I tried a last-ditch effort. “Reid, is there any chance you’d discuss this with an open mind?”

“Sure, let’s have an open discussion. In fact, let’s go speak openly about this with our parents and see what they have to say,” Reid said tightly.

He stepped toward the bedroom door. I lunged at him and grabbed his arm while yanking him down the stairs. “Okay, let’s leave.” I rushed him before he could change his mind.

His rental car was waiting outside. Shouldering my purse, I opened the passenger side door. Reid rounded the car, put the keys in the ignition, and pulled out of the street.

Reid was still seething, acting like I was some battered woman shielding her man.

“So, why Baltimore?” I asked while strapping myself in to divert him from his anger. We had no friends, family, or connections there. It was an odd choice. “Where are you staying?”

“Sam’s grandmother recently passed away. I asked him if I could stay at her house for a bit.”

I dropped the topic to dig into my purse. We had barely left, and I was already feeling antsy. After searching my purse twice, I still didn’t see my phone. “Hey, where’s my phone?”

“I left it inside your nightstand drawer.”

“What the fuck, Reid! Why would you leave behind something so damn important?”

“I did it so we can go off the grid. Milo probably has an app installed on your phone to track you, just like he does with Mia.”

“Who the hell cares?” I seethed. “I need my phone. What if our parents try to reach me? Plus, I work with Alexa now. How is she supposed to get in touch? Turn this car around. Now!”

Reid eyed me suspiciously. “Mia told me about your work with Alexa. She mentioned you put a pause on your website. So you don’t have to work. Mia also knows I am taking you away. She’ll let everyone know, so they don’t have to worry.”

I silently fumed. Milo and I recently exchanged numbers. I didn’t know his number or any of the other Sinclairs’ numbers by heart. I left my laptop behind, too.

“Can I at least use your phone to text Mia?”

“As I’ve mentioned, I lost my charger. My phone is dead,” Reid muttered coolly.

“Why don’t you stop somewhere so we can buy you a new charger?” I suggested icily.

“I am not going to do that. I have decided I need to do an exorcism on you.”

My brows shot up. “An-exor-what?”

“An exorcism,” Reid repeated. “Priests do it to rid your body of demons. You obviously have a demon living inside of you in the name of my brother. I need to pull it out of you.”

I stared at Reid in disbelief, then burst out laughing. Reid also grinned from ear to ear. It was the first lighthearted moment we had shared.

“And what exactly does an exorcism entail?” I asked in a mocking tone.

“We are going off the radar to go on a ‘bender’ around Sam’s big empty house,” Reid declared. “It’s in the middle of nowhere. We can use the time to talk this out. I have a truth serum. It’s called Tequila.”

Reid and I used to go on benders. He'd fly to Paris, and we'd unplug from technology to go on a directionless road trip slash bender. I never approved, but at least I could monitor him if I went along. Either I joined him to keep an eye out or worry about him turning up dead in a ditch.

"Look, Rave. We are turning twenty-two soon. This bender can be an extended weekend-long birthday celebration."

Reid thought he was protecting me by showing me the light. Unfortunately for him, I liked the dark.

"Sorry, Reid. I have to get back. Why don't we put a pin on this discussion of ours? Then we can celebrate with the whole family."

As if sensing the real reason for my hesitation, Reid sighed.

"Rave, I didn't tell our parents or contact the authorities. What's the harm in taking the next few days to talk it out while we celebrate our birthdays? It's a fair trade-off for keeping my mouth shut, don't you think?"

Our families always made a big deal of our birthdays since the two of us shared a day. This year, Milo mentioned he had planned something. My heart sank at the idea of not having him around.

"You have until our birthdays for your exorcism," I conceded.

I didn't love the idea, but I had already explained the situation to Milo. Reid was going to be in our lives forever. No time like the present to find a way to move past this. Plus, I majorly fucked up by falling in love with my best friend's brother. I could use this time to seek Reid's forgiveness.

"The house is stocked with food and alcohol," Reid continued, "so let's drink and grill. They also have a karaoke machine, and no one will be around to make fun of our singing."

"People just don't understand how talented we are," I jested. "We should be on The Voice or American Idol."

Reid relaxed his shoulders. The rest of the ride was filled with teasing while avoiding the elephant in the car.

As we sped off on the I-95 highway on a gloomy day, little did I realize I wouldn't see Milo again for a whole year.

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LIES

Raven,

I have been staring at paint for days. The pattern doesn't change. The color doesn't change. So, I have no idea why I continue staring at the same shit.

It's been three days since we last saw each other. I shouldn't have lied to you, although by the time I found you sitting at your old brownstone, you were emotionally worked up from your conversation with Mia. I couldn't bear upsetting you any further.

At that moment, we only needed each other. My mind was fucked from an altercation with Mia. I shouldn't have put my hands on her. It was a complete blacked-out blur. Unable to face Mia again or cope with the sight of your empty room, I packed my bags and moved to the condo. Now, I'm wondering if there is a reason to unpack.

The image of you stabbing yourself with a knife has been circulating my mind for days. It feels like perhaps everyone will be safer without me around, especially you.

My job was to take care of you, but I was the one who screwed you guys up. I put my hands on Mia. I

threatened to murder my brother on multiple occasions. And I fucked you up beyond repair.

That's the effect of my charms.

I once read that writing letters with thoughts you'd never otherwise articulate was therapeutic. So, I'm putting this in writing, hoping it will help me find a solution.

However, I'll never send this letter or tell you what I did to Mia. If you found out, you'd never look at me the same. That small speck of sunshine will be gone forever, and it's the only thing I have ever had.

I love you,

Milo

CHAPTER 2

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THE PRESENT
A YEAR WITH YOU - SPRING 2021

One Year Later



Raven

A SEA OF UNFAMILIAR FACES SURROUNDED ME. LOOKING FROM ONE PROFILE to the next, I could confidently verify I didn't know a single soul at this engagement party.

Alexa was getting married in a few weeks in Tulum, Mexico. This town was a major attraction for Americans, only two hours from Cancun and geared toward an upscale demographic who were hell-bent on avoiding the hordes of college kids on steroids.

Alexa's fiancé worked out of Tulum, so the planning started with a destination wedding with only their intimate clique as attendants. However, due to their close-knit circle of countless friends and family, the wedding had become an avid affair. Alexa was hosting this engagement party to kick off the celebrations prematurely and to provide an excuse for New York's finest to indulge in two back-to-back vacations in this beautiful city.

Alexa made her fairy tale ending come true. After realizing her feelings for Milo would never be reciprocated, Alexa limited their interactions. Within

weeks of making healthy choices for herself, she met her fiancé. After a whirlwind romance, the two got engaged.

Alexa temporarily moved to Mexico to plan her wedding. She invited me to join her since we were friends and still business partners. She hooked me up with a great room rental rate at the resort, courtesy of her fiancé, so I jumped at the opportunity.

Unfortunately, tonight's guest list was jam-packed with Alexa's immediate family and closest friends. Since Jaci and Brandon opted to skip the engagement party, I was in foreign territory, no pun intended.

As for Milo, we parted ways a long time ago under a mutual agreement.

Actually, that's bullshit.

The truth? Milo dumped my sorry ass and abandoned New York. He also ceased communication with our remaining family members. However, at the last minute, he RSVP'd for tonight.

I took in the extravagance around me to distract myself from the impending possibilities. The party was in the courtyard of a lavish hotel outside of Tulum. There was a tiki bar in one corner with an all-you-can-drink option, while the DJ was on the opposite end. One of those decorative pools with floating candles and fake water lilies was incorporated in the middle to set the ambiance. The hoity-toity pool screamed you could gawk at the ostentatious finished product, but you couldn't swim in it.

This spectacularism was tied together with the view of the ocean in the background.

I nervously tapped my fingers on the bar countertop, anxiously glancing toward the entrance one too many times while waiting on the server. The bartender handed me a cocktail, a fruity red drink. I had barely taken a sip when I sensed an odd silence falling over. Most of the women at the bar were looking in the same direction.

My eyes followed theirs to the entranceway... only to freeze after locking in on the target. My heart thumped so loud in my chest it might as well

break open my rib cage.

Broad shoulders.

Rigid jawline.

Milo. Fucking. Sinclair.

He always did know how to command the attention of a room. You could almost hear the collective sigh tumbling from every female's lips. Milo was still so damn beautiful that staring appeared to be the only acceptable reaction.

No matter the measures I had taken to prepare myself for this encounter, none of my mental preparations were sufficient for an impact of this magnitude.



Milo

When I received an invitation to Alexa's engagement party, I declined it without a second thought. After talking it over with Reid, my interest was piqued.

Alexa was outraged by my last-minute RSVP and gave me a mouthful about 'learning consideration for the wedding details.' Wedding planning had turned her into a bridezilla.

Since my RSVP, I had been locked in a menacing staring contest with the clock, crawling from one minute to the next, mentally willing time to move faster until reaching this very moment.

This moment when Raven looked up from the bar counter to penetrate me with her gaze.

She wore a dress fitted around her small waist and flared at the bottom. It wasn't meant to be overly provocative. However, everything touching her skin felt lewd and erotic.

Yet, it also radiated something chaste and pure—A white dream in heaven.

Raven's body had always been alluring to me. Creamy skin. Perky tits. Now her hourglass figure reflected a new gym routine, and her exposed, toned thighs told a story of their own. I could practically shape her perfect peach ass through that dress.

I swallowed.

After fantasizing for months, Raven's real-life form managed to exceed expectations. It's not because of the hair, the tan, or the new body. Raven's loneliness was what fascinated me the most. Her desolation stemmed from a forlorn life, adding a heartbreaking and peaceful layer to her appeal—A lonely girl.



Raven

Milo quickly scanned the courtyard until locking eyes with me. It was like being jolted by an electric shock. I turned slightly to set my drink on the bar counter, hands shaking from anticipation. How could I still feel this utterly consumed by him?

I had hardly cataloged the thought before smelling the distinct musky scent of my ex-boyfriend. I felt his presence but couldn't persuade my eyes to look up. His smell, sound, and look were a triple threat. I'd melt if I were hit with all three simultaneously.

"Rave."

I sucked in a sharp breath and turned to find Milo towering over me. The sight of him was worse than his sound. The troubled emerald eyes. Sharp cheeks. Generous lips.

His dark brown hair was marginally shorter, but it was still messy as all hell. The defined biceps peek out from underneath his short sleeves. His

broad chest made the shirt fit like a glove, and the thin material allowed the ogling women to check out the goods underneath.

Milo possessed this sophistication mixed with mystery and the subtlest hint of cruelty. It gave him an edge, like the bad boy from the wrong side of the track, reverberating with the refined aura of old money.

“Hello, Milo,” I managed to grate out, voice small and uneven.

Milo didn’t respond. Instead, he stood there, staring, unmoving.

When he still hadn’t spoken, I added, “I hear it’s polite to say hello upon seeing someone.”

A smirk tugged at his lips. “Hello,” he drawled.

I waited for him to add more. He didn’t. After all, I did only probe for a hello. I just assumed he’d have more details to spare.

“Hello,” I repeated his one-liner.

"How have you been?" His voice was husky. Rough.

“I’m okay. How about yourself?”

“I’m fine,” he replied while simultaneously signaling the bartender for a beer. “*Una Cerveza, por favor.*”

Milo wordlessly grabbed the beer bottle from the bartender and sampled it. I focused on nursing my drink. Twice, I twisted my body, intending to embrace him. While our breakup was abrupt, I didn’t harbor negative feelings toward Milo... at least not anymore. A simple hug shouldn’t be so far-fetched, but Milo’s reserved manners kept me at bay.

We continued sipping our drinks and loitering by the bar while the other guests mingled. The music thumped around us. Shots were poured all around. We were lost to it all, staring as if the other were a phantom.

The spell was broken when a herd of people shoved past Milo to get to the bar, moving him close enough for our bodies to graze. His eyes instantly fixated on my mouth.

As if remembering something important, Milo stepped away, maintaining a foot of distance between us. I suddenly understood his reservations. When I last saw Milo, he made sure never to touch me physically without warning so as not to set me off.

I took a sip of my drink, only to almost spit it out at his following comment. “Raven, your body’s out of control,” he blurted. “Do you just live at the gym?”

A set of thirsty, emerald eyeballs lazily rolled over my body. My summer dress was conservative enough not to induce this level of excitement. Nonetheless, Milo made me feel naked, my skin flushing under his heated look.

“Guess I have been working out a lot,” I admitted, lifting an unsure shoulder.

“I thought you, of all people, would never find out what the inside of a gym looks like.”

“Well, I found out,” I laughed, the unease seeping out of me at Milo’s light-heartedness.

“How come you started working out?” he asked, sounding uncharacteristically inquisitive.

Other than dance classes, I hated any form of physical exertion. The first thought to pop into my head was to tell him the truth—the need to fill my days with activities so that I could take my mind off him. However, something told me informing Milo about my personal trainer’s identity might sour the mellow mood. His knowing eyes honed in, implying he already had his suspicions.

So, I said the first thing that came to mind to distract him. “Is there a reason for your sudden RSVP to today’s event?” Milo looked taken aback at my hasty outburst, so I tried to scale back. “I mean... we haven’t seen each other in all this time...”

“I’d rather not discuss this while we are at a party for our friend’s wedding.”

He was right—tonight was about Alexa.

Nonetheless, Milo added, “But why don’t we call this a prequel discussion? We can meet again to talk more.”

“Is that your way of extorting a date out of me? Let me guess; you’ve officially become so old you couldn’t figure out how to work Tinder. It’s swipe right, Milo.” Dragging my index finger, I made a gesture to swipe the invisible air.

“No, I figured out Tinder, but the arthritis in my finger joints makes it painful to swipe.”

A burst of husky laughter mutually tumbled out of our mouths.

“And I’m not extorting you. I’m manipulating you,” Milo added without a trace of amusement.

“Please,” I droned, “enlighten me on the difference.”

“I’m manipulating you by using something you want against you.” His voice remained engrossed in the conversation. “If I were extorting you, I’d be threatening you in exchange for something. For example, give me your lunch money, or I’ll kill your puppy.”

“Lovely,” I retorted dryly. “Thank you for the lesson on white-collar crimes. You’re going nowhere near Mr. Whiskers!”

“That’s your dog’s name?” Milo looked at me like I was a crazy person. “You know that’s a cat’s name, right?”

I scowled. My dog was the perfect Mr. Whiskers. “Noted,” I mumbled. “Let’s go back to talking about blackmailing.”

“No way. Let’s talk about this... Mr. Whiskers.” Milo motioned his hand in the air, making imaginary waves.

Milo never allowed us anything past a fish or reptile as a pet. The deal was, if Reid and Mia could keep a goldfish alive, they'd graduate to more demanding pets. Unfortunately, those goldfish always died due to neglect. Then they'd coerce Milo into giving their pets a funeral, turning our backyard into a graveyard.

However, I was now the proud owner of a dog, my balm for my heart. Milo wasn't a pet person and was unable to comprehend the appeal. Nonetheless, when I peeked up, I found Milo smiling down at me, looking amused over my gibberish about a dog.

A motionless moment passed before another horde of people bumped into Milo. Once more, his body was shoved against mine.

Milo shifted to break contact before abruptly stopping. A frown formed on his forehead. He maintained the stance instead of backing away as he did before.

Abruptly, a group of seven crowded us, interrupting us. The best-dressed man out of the bunch slapped Milo on the back. "Milo, my man!" Jerry exclaimed. Besides Alexa, Jerry was the only person I knew at this party. He was Alexa's fiancé.

Alexa threw her arms around Milo's neck. "Took you long enough to make up your mind about attending," Alexa reprimanded as Milo mumbled a polite apology.

She let go of Milo to hug me next and introduced us to the rest of their posse. We exchanged hellos, and Alexa announced, "Let's do some shots!"

The group cheered, and the bartender poured alcohol into a line of shot glasses. Despite all the crap we had been through, Milo and I had never done anything as trivial as share a drink at a bar.

Milo appeared at ease. The girls fluttered their lashes at him, already smitten by his charms. When Jerry informed the group Milo had been featured on Forbes a few times, the boys became just as besotted. Apparently, he was every woman AND man's type.

Our eyes clashed every so often. Milo attempted to engage me in conversation, but we were frequently interrupted by someone vying for his attention. Milo graciously listened, but I detected his slight irritation rising by the minute.

“Why don’t you tell us what you and Alexa have been doing lately at work?” Milo directed the question at me before another person could monopolize his time.

All eyes turned to me when the pack leader diverted his attention.

I started to ramble on cue. “Alexa and I now cater to companies with their own sales and marketing teams. We send seamstresses on-site to measure their team for custom shirts and suits. It was all Alexa’s brilliant idea.” I motioned toward Alexa, who waved the compliment away with her hand.

Without paying mind to the assembly line, Milo carried on our exchange. Whenever someone tried to barge into our discussion, Milo brushed them off. All the while, seven people awkwardly stared between us as he acted like they weren’t present and we were having a private conversation.

Despite initially adhering to an invisible boundary, Milo inched closer until I had the urge to stop breathing whenever his smell reached my nostrils. Gradually, Milo engaged in minor physical exchanges. His knuckles lightly grazed my bare shoulders. His fingertips orbited on the small of my back.

My tongue darted out of my mouth to lick my dry bottom lip to create moisture. Milo’s eyes landed on my mouth, and he flexed his fingers on my back. It had me reaching my threshold of withstanding this torture.

“Excuse me for a moment,” I cut our conversation short, though I had hardly paid attention over the last ten minutes.

The other side of the bar was secluded. I marched toward it, needing another drink, a shot, or an entire bottle to settle my nerves.

The bartender settled a drink in front of me. I had only just taken a sip when I sensed Milo’s presence. His hands landed on the counter on either side of me to trap me between his body and the bar.

“Rave, why did you walk away?”

My clasped hands tightened in front of me. “I just needed another drink, and I thought service might be faster here.”

“Hmm.” Milo sounded unperturbed, his fingers ‘unintentionally’ brushing against the bare skin between my shoulder blades.

My heart went into overdrive, and I spun to face him. “Milo,” I whispered wantonly. “What are you doing?”

Instead of responding, he smoothed down my hair with his palm.

I was the deer, but he wasn’t the headlights. He was the car about to ram into me.

After what seemed like millennia, Milo finally dropped his hand from my hair.

My body sagged in relief. When I thought my torture had ended, Milo’s hand transitioned to my face. His fingers hovered over my cheek. The light and airy touch might as well be carnal and sinful.

“Why don’t you react to me like you used to?”

So, that’s it? Milo assessed I wasn’t reacting negatively to him and was trying to confirm the theory with more physical contact. I never much noticed my so-called physiological reactions. Milo was the one always to point it out, which eventually changed his behavior toward me.

“I don’t know,” I muttered with utmost honesty.



Milo

I concluded my experiment after an onslaught of “accidental” touches. Raven didn’t shudder, cower, or shy away from me.

Each passing moment made it apparent I could touch her at liberty. I took a step closer, and her palm landed flat on my chest, rising and falling with the change in my breathing pattern.

“I missed you so damn much.” My voice trembled from anticipation, unable to hide my desire for her. The rarest delicacies had just been offered to a duo of famished creatures. Never did I expect Raven to be free from the horrors of our past. Now that she was, holding off for a moment longer was impossible.

Raven froze at my revelation. “I missed you more than you’ll know,” she whispered. We were past feigning our feelings.

I pacified her by stroking her cheek with the back of my hand. “You looked miserable around me—”

Raven’s lips cut off my words as they smashed against mine. I almost growled when I tasted the alcohol in her mouth. My hands wandered her transformed body. I wanted to know her new shape and curves without barriers. I’d rip that dress off if I weren’t concerned with assholes gawking at her. Instead, I pinned her against the bar counter, my body covering every inch of hers. Raven’s back hit the hard counter, and I gripped her waist tightly to keep her in place.

Breaking the kiss, I dragged my nose and mouth over every pressure point—the base of her neck, pulse, and under her ears. My eyes closed by the time my nose landed in her hair, taking audible inhales as if trying to steal her essence through the power of smell. My hand made a fist in her hair, the other wrapped around her waist.

I nipped at her lips, groaning, biting, kissing her hard enough to leave her soft lips abused.

There were no misgivings of my intentions when I trailed my hand along the hem of her mid-thigh-length dress to access her bare skin.

Raven circled my wrist with her hand to stop me from hiking her dress up higher. “Milo, people are watching.”

“No one’s watching.” Or I assumed that was the case because I gave no flying fucks if we were lewd in public.

Not to mention, we were as secluded as possible. The DJ just turned up the music. Guests were either on the dance floor or the other side of the bar, keeping the bartenders slammed. The bar counter was blocking the bottom half of our bodies from onlookers.

I yanked her dress up right as Raven pulled it back down. The sheer force ripped the bottom of her dress, and Raven squealed at the impact.

Using her surprise, I slipped my fingers under the material of her dress and between her pussy lips. The slick and smooth skin between her legs welcomed me in. I was salivating for a taste, practically bursting from the need. I forced myself from dropping to the floor and sucking on her pussy until she juiced all over my face.

“Milo, I—” Her voice died down in her throat when two fingers stroked her from the inside, wrenching a passionate cry from Raven. She muffled the sound by biting her lip, though the loud music had already drowned it out.

I grabbed her ass under her dress with my free hand, squeezing it hard to pull her closer, letting her feel my hard length against her hips. My lips on her earlobes curved when her unsteady legs vibrated, melting into me. “Did you miss me here?”

Raven whimpered weakly.

“Fuck,” I grunted when her flaming hot pussy sent off needy tremors. I possessively curled my fingers to remedy her ache, my entire palm mercilessly grinding her clit to wreak havoc. Desperation echoed through every channel of Raven’s body, and the blood in her cunt thumped against my fingers. An indescribable exhilaration spread on my fingers that burnt from the warmth inside her.

“You are vibrating against me. I can feel you,” I gritted out painfully, imagining my cock in that warm chokehold.

Raven bucked against me, her body ready to erupt. I held her tightly against me. Raven buried her face in my chest, biting down to stop herself from screaming. The sheer force of her lust almost made me come in my pants.

I grabbed her jaw when her lips parted for a scream, tipped her face up, and slammed my lips to hers. I swallowed her moans, devouring and bruising her lips in the process.

Her whole body practically collapsed as she spasmed from every last bit of her release. Raven breathed loudly, panting against my accelerated heart. One of my hands rested on her hair as her body softened.

All I wanted to do was crawl inside her, but this would have to do... for now.

Raven finally straightened from my chest to look down at her dress. It had ripped at the hem. Then she awkwardly looked around, clearly embarrassed. I couldn't help my sly grin.

With as much pride as she could muster, Raven said, "Well, thank you for that, but seeing that you ripped my dress, I think it'd be considered good manners to at least take me back to my resort."

Without a backward glance, Raven skated past me. Her hand fisted the bottom of her dress but failed to conceal the ripped material from prying eyes. Somehow managing to hold her head up high, Raven walked out in her noticeably torn outfit.

With low laughter in tow, I followed her out.



Raven

My speedy departure from the party was interrupted when Milo, with a devious grin, yanked my hand, tugging me toward a Jeep parked out front. "I got a rental car after I landed."

“Nice car,” I commented, hopping inside when Milo pulled the passenger door open.

As I watched Milo round the car, I relived my appall over what just happened. I couldn’t believe we did that in public. Five minutes around Milo, and I couldn’t think straight.

Milo climbed aboard and turned to me. His hand lightly scraped my shoulder as he reached behind to pull at the seat belt to strap me in. Instead of retreating to his seat, Milo stroked my cheek with his thumb, sending a shiver right through me.

“I came here straight from the airport. I didn’t check into my hotel yet,” Milo informed. All the wedding guests were staying at the same resort in Tulum. It was a long drive. “Checking in will take too long. We’re going back to your place,” he said pointedly, the heavy meaning hanging in the air that we’d be spending the night together.

I clenched my thighs together and barely moved my head to nod. I was a quivering, wet mess from his unspoken promise.

Milo hurriedly withdrew his hand to put the Jeep in gear. Using his phone’s navigation, he took off at full speed.

My whole body throbbed for his touch again; I was practically in agony. Milo’s zealous hand was on my thigh, squeezing hard enough to make me wince. His eagerness was transparent, and his arousal was evident to the naked eye.

“GPS says it’s still thirty minutes away.” I didn’t bother hiding my impatient tone.

“Fuck. That’s far.” His voice was laced with an edge, sounding like a grenade about to go off. He sensed my leg bouncing under his hold and sped up.

Impatient, Milo’s hand inched between my thighs to slip inside. “Are you insane? We are going to crash,” I protested.

Milo ignored my comment, swiftly jerking free of my grasp. His fingers parted my pussy lips.

“Fuck,” I cried out on instinct, my head falling back on the headrest. Blood was pumping in my veins. His fingers were rough and unforgiving, stretching me out and forcing me to take it as he saw fit. He scraped my walls and twirled his fingers inside me, swiping his thumb over my clit.

My moan dissolved into the air when I sensed the car shifting lanes. The tires screeched as Milo slammed on the brake and killed the engine. Unclipping my seat belt, he collected me into his lap, reclining his car seat. He distracted me while taking an exit off the highway. We were now in a semi-abandoned street.

“This isn’t Tulum,” I made the most apparent observation before catching a glimpse of his hardened expression.

“I can’t wait any longer,” he explained, maneuvering my body to straddle him and sliding my thong down. His frantic hands were fighting with my dress, sliding it up to expose my back and ass. “God, I missed you.” The tender words sounded harsh through his rigid mouth.

“What if there are cops around? Shouldn’t we wait—”

“Not another fucking second,” Milo hissed. “You have tortured me enough.”

Milo unbuckled his jeans to grip his dick. My logical argument took a hike as he pulled me down on his hard length, nudging my opening with his cock. I could hardly hold onto his shoulders for balance when he thrust up with enough force to unseat me. His mouth sealed over mine while his hands guided my hips, making me ride him faster and faster.

Milo panted, his heart beating hard under my palm. I watched in awe as he sucked on his index fingers and reached behind me. Grabbing my ass firmly, he spread the cheeks, breaching a lubricated finger between my crease.

“Relax,” he whispered, sensing my expectancy. “Just let me in, baby.”

I chewed on my bottom lip, further pressing into his snug hold.

Milo surged a finger against my puckered opening. Broken whimpers descended from my mouth as his finger pushed past the tight ring to slide inside.

My nails dug into his shoulders. Mashing my teeth together, I relaxed my muscles when he distracted me with his other hand on my clit. I shivered as he peeled my dress to free my breasts. The tongue on my nipple filled me with a heated sensation every time he lapped over it, followed by a cold numbness each time he stopped.

“Fuck, Milo. Don’t stop.” Mindless, I cried out.

Milo’s finger reached inside, persistently pressing against every nerve. When he hit a spot that had me seeing stars, my thighs shook, barely aware of how greedily Milo sucked on my tits. I was lost in his heady scent, soaring to reach that vertex.

I moaned as I came around his cock, my bold sounds invading the space around us. It didn’t matter the roof of the Jeep was down. A rapture-like pure bliss upsurged from within my body. An outburst ripped through me like it was the end of the world.

Milo didn’t stop impaling me, his thick cock feeling more swollen. My pussy passionately clamped down despite my apex. He cursed as warmth filled me from the inside, the groans from his height matching my own.

When Milo finally wiggled the finger out of my ass, I collapsed on him, uncaring if anyone was watching me.



Milo

Tulum only had one street, and a surprising amount of traffic was on it. When I finally saw the resort building, my cock was hard and pulsing. I couldn’t think straight until sinking into Raven again.

I practically sprinted out of my Jeep after parking it. I opened the car door for Raven, grabbing my travel bag from the back seat. Raven almost veered off course before I got a hold of her. She was such a klutz. I had no idea how this girl used to be a dancer.

Taking long strides, we crossed the parking lot to enter the resort and silently walked to Raven's suite. I might not make it past her suite door and take her against it. I wanted to take it slow but fuck all that bullshit.

Raven swiped the door key to let us in. Inside was a bedroom with a small living room and a kitchenette. It was a beachfront suite with double doors opening up to the sandy shore.

I threw my bag on the living room floor to find a shadow moving inside the small crate sitting next to the sofa.

"This is Mr. Whiskers," Raven reached inside the crate to pull out a twenty-pound dog.

Pets weren't exactly my thing. They were dirty and needy. I grew up with a bunch of people relying on me; I didn't need more of the same.

I raised an eyebrow at the dog she was holding to her chest and acknowledged it with a nod. Raven's small figure dawdled unsurely. If she was expecting me to hold that bat-looking thing, it wasn't happening.

"Do you want to go to the potty?" she asked against the dog's ears. "I fed him before I left," she offered without inquiry. "So, he's good for the night."

Raven laid the dog down on the bed placed inside the crate. He fell asleep before she retreated her hands, but my attention wasn't remotely on the damn dog.

Raven revised my impatient posture. No guesswork needed to be made about what I wanted. "We still have our fair number of issues to discuss," she skipped ahead. "And work through them," she clarified while walking back toward the bed, a silent invitation dancing in her features.

“We will. I can extend my stay in Mexico so we can work through everything—” I stopped mid-sentence when Raven hopped on the bed, descending onto the mattress one vertebrae at a time.

My lust-filled eyes remained steadfast on what could only be described as my personal live-action porn. Licking my bottom lip expectantly, I moved toward the lone entity I needed to feel whole again.

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PART TWO

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SUMMER

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CHAPTER 3

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THE PAST
A YEAR WITHOUT YOU - SUMMER 2020



Raven

REID AND I CELEBRATED OUR BIRTHDAYS WITH A BENDER. EAT, DRINK, sleep, repeat. The extra rest had done wonders for my dark circles. My nightmares had squandered away, and my appetite had been restored.

However, what started as a weekend celebration extended to several days with no end in sight. I missed Milo so damn much. He was in my system, in the blood coursing through my veins.

But all three Sinclair kids struggled with their tempers and made erratic decisions. So, risking a fallout with Reid and Mia wasn't smart. Logically, staying put was the better alternate.

So, I tried hashing things out with Reid by revealing a few ambiguous truths.

I mentioned Milo and I were an item during my senior year of high school. After unearthing Reid's feelings for me (cue an awkward moment), matters got out of hand due to some emotionally charged exchanges. As a result, I moved to Paris. Our time apart gave us insight, and our reunion led to rekindling of our relationship.

My explanations weren't exactly thriving.

I attempted to impart my knowledge of Milo's psyche. Milo was relentless about my triggers but unaware of his.

Since moving back to the brownstone, Milo had made numerous references suggesting I was his escape from this family's toxicity. We both had this incessant need to improve our loved ones' lives, as we were innate caretakers.

It wasn't about Milo's looks, money, success, or the goddamn six-pack abs and the perfect V carved onto his abdomen. Milo could be fat, poor, or ugly, and I'd love him all the same.

Simply put, I loved Milo unequivocally because of his big heart.

When I was younger, I never fell in love with Milo because I never saw this side of him, the caring significant other who was also my partner in crime. Now that I had, I'd be ruined if he were snatched away. The same held true for Milo. He couldn't cope with losing the only person who shared his hardships. The notion must've set off his childhood abandonment issues. It was self-preservation instincts because, without the concept of us, it was a life with people who'd never divvy up the burden or help him carry the load.

But I only inspired Reid's pity whenever I defended Milo with these thoughts, as he believed me to have lost my marbles. So, he made excuses to stretch our 'staycation.'

After all these days, we were still at an impasse.

I wasn't giving Milo up.

Reid was adamant that my mental state was debilitating.

He was right—I am sick. I just had no interest in an antidote. Breathing without Milo had become difficult. My chest was always tight, and airflow was constantly restricted. At this point, I didn't care if Reid considered me to be, in his words, 'stuck in the loop of an abusive relationship and in need of severe professional help.'

I had entertained Reid's exorcism, and Goddamnit, if he hadn't tried every method to rid me of this Milo ghost.

If Reid were indeed my friend, he'd take me back to New York without breathing a word to our parents or threatening the man I loved. I loathed this situation, given Reid's feelings for me. However, if it were reversed, I'd want Reid to be happy.

I was still in bed with my thoughts when Reid burst through the bedroom door.

"I need a liver transplant."

"Wha—"

"Liver. I need a new one. I wanted to celebrate our birthdays before telling you."

No, Good Morning. No, hello. Just a joke. I shot up from the bed. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"My liver's failing, and I need a transplant."

My eyes bulged out of my face, unsure if I should believe him. "W-What?"

"Are you deaf?" Reid asked with a straight face. "I've said it three times already. I need a brand new shiny liver."

"Stop it, Reid," I screamed. "This isn't funny."

"Who's joking?" Reid shrugged.

I put up a hand. Reid nodded to acknowledge giving me a minute to process. He shoved a thick manila folder in my face, which I wordlessly opened. Pages and pages of medical records came pouring out from it. There were reports, notes, and various recommendations.

We were drinking together mere hours ago. Why the fuck was Reid drinking if he needed a transplant?

“Stop it,” he commanded. “I can see your brain moving a million miles an hour. I’ll explain everything, but you may want to sit down for this.”



Reid

A couple of months ago, I went to the doctor for persistent nausea and fatigue. Shortly after Raven fell down the stairs, the doctor’s office called me to come in for a biopsy.

I started drinking behind Milo’s back after turning thirteen. It had caught up to me. At the age of twenty-two, I needed a new liver.

Since Milo and I weren’t on speaking terms due to Raven, I turned to my dad instead. Dad urged me to meet a specialist at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. He wanted to tag along, but I didn’t want to leave Raven in her condition. So, Dad promised to stay behind and keep an eye on Raven.

Before catching Milo and Raven together, I wanted to marry the fuck out of her. After all, I was made for her, which wasn’t hyperbole.

When the Becketts discovered they were pregnant, my parents intended to try for a second child. The idea of two children growing up together was exciting, so my parents thought no time like the present. They played God a little too well. I was a preemie baby, born an hour before Raven, ready for the physical realm the moment she was.

Raven and I had a cosmic bond, but her heart defied all odds to fall in love with Milo.

She spent years away from Milo, probably to preserve my feelings. If the situation had been reversed, I couldn’t have done it. How much more could a man ask of his best friend?

If Raven truly stayed away from Milo out of consideration for me, I owed it to her not to be a thorn in her happiness. So, I decided to step away temporarily instead of letting her drown in misery over my health issues.

So, why did you have to fuck it up, Milo?

When Mia called me, everything changed. I realized Raven didn't have the good life I had envisioned. She was drowning, and I could no longer hold back my feelings.

That day I picked Raven up from New York, and my heart ripped open. The woman I loved was shredded. Bruised. Wrecked.

Her mental state was in worse condition than her physical. Whatever Milo put her through led to some form of a psychotic break. Yet, she spent the last few days protecting him.

It wasn't about my relationship with Raven anymore. I could put a pin on that to focus on the real issue—Raven's sanity and safety. The lack of both was freaking me out.

Raven was so desperate to get back to Milo that I finally had to disclose my diagnosis to distract her. A transplant wasn't arduous for someone in my age group, but Raven was freaking out, demanding to see every doctor's report. She'd evaluate every note, highlighting anything she didn't understand. Raven's attention was now laser-focused.

So, I had one day to figure out their fucked-up relationship. If I didn't, Milo might go too far, as he did with Mia, and next time, he might not stop.

With the terrifying reminder, I left Raven to it and drove back to where it all began; the cursed house in New York City.



I drove directly to our brownstone from Maryland, only to be redirected to Milo's condo. He had been camping there for days, but the doorbell must have been broken. I rang it relentlessly. Once. Twice. Over and over.

"Take a fucking hint," Milo finally shouted from the other side of the door.

"Open the fucking door, asshole," I shouted back.

Following the sound of feet shuffling, the clinking of what I presumed were beer bottles, and the click of the deadbolt, the door creaked open with utmost struggle.

“You look like shit,” Milo grumbled.

“You, too,” I deadpanned.

The black shiner Milo sported curved half of my mouth into a smile. I hoped Raven was the one to bestow that upon him. I’d love to do the same, but the drive alone was perilous, riddled with nausea. Hitting Milo would only amplify my suffering.

I pushed past him, purposefully shoving his shoulder with my own. Milo rolled his eyes. Not my finest moment, but my options for retribution were limited due to my new physical hindrance.

“How is she?” he asked.

Milo’s audacity painted a scowl on my face. To inquire about her welfare after everything he had done... Fuck it!

I turned around and swung my fist. Milo deflected it with minimal effort by leaning back. Instead of retaliating, he exhaled the way parents did when dealing with the petulant middle child.

“If you are going to try that again, I need a beer.” Milo marched to the kitchen without looking back.

The trip to our childhood home was eye-opening. After discovering Milo’s change in residency, I went to Raven’s room and dug her cell phone out of the nightstand. I charged it and noted the texts Raven had sent Milo before our impromptu trip. As luck would have it, the texts failed to send, and I deleted them.

Then, I went through Raven’s laptop to read eons worth of text and email exchanges with Milo. The content of the conversations left me haunted.

Milo strolled back to the living room, extending the beer bottle in his right hand. Grabbing the beer, I placed it on the counter. Milo followed the

movement. I had never turned down a drink before.

“Are you going to tell me how she is?” he asked.

“She’s none of your fucking business.”

Milo’s eyes briskly turned to slits. "Everything about her is my fucking business," he gritted out.

"If that's how you feel, how the hell could you do that to her?" I bellowed.

"Don’t worry about what’s between us. Stay in your damn lane, Reid.”

“Really!? That’s all you have to say after everything? You put your hands on our baby sister. Who are you? I don’t recognize you anymore.” In general, it was tough to decipher Milo’s feelings. Though he couldn’t hide his disgrace today.

Milo wasn’t expecting me to be privy to this information. In Mia’s hierarchy, there was never anyone above Milo. In the recent years, Milo had been dumping Mia on Raven, who welcomed it with open arms. He underestimated Mia’s newfound loyalty to Raven.

Milo didn’t harp on my words, though. Instead, his demeanor shifted when he stepped closer. His features softened as he examined me with intense scrutiny. Unsure of what he discerned to abruptly alter the tone of our conversation, I sidestepped him.

“Reid, what’s wrong with you?” he probed gently, the tenor from the heated conversation gone from his tone.

“I can ask you the same question,” I retorted.

Milo examined my skin's yellowish tone and the dark circles under my eyes. His eyes darted to my untouched beer on top of the counter. “Reid, what's going on with you?”

“I need a liver transplant,” I stated flatly.

Unlike Raven, Milo didn’t make me repeat the morbid detail. Instead, he absorbed the information and abruptly grabbed me at lightning speed,

pulling me into an unexpected hug.

I didn't move, nor did I shove him away. If anything, I took in the momentary consolation from the only father figure I have had.

I know what you're thinking.

How could I still love a man who abused the woman I loved? Well, fuck you and your judgmental self!

If you thought my brother was evil, you were wrong. While half of me hated him, there was a part that quasi-understood there were two sides to a story.

Milo was a master at masking his emotions. I never saw this fixation on Raven. It wasn't surprising that a younger and naïve Raven didn't either.

However, little was left to interpret from the candor in his emails and texts to Raven. Milo admitted to his actions, yet there wasn't a hint of evidence that served to redeem their story. Their interactions remained hot-blooded and unstable, at times unpredictable.

Eventually, I understood two things.

The behavior Milo displayed toward Raven was exclusively retained for her. Other than with Raven, Milo was a good man. No other woman could drive him crazy enough to lose all forms of his sanity, and other than about Milo, Raven was logical. No other man could drive her to the brink of insanity.

Milo acted so much like an adult that none of us considered what it must have done to him never to experience a childhood. Raven was the first person who took care of Milo. The only kindness in his life. It made me want to time travel to punch my teenage self for not being a better brother. If I had, Milo could have turned out differently.

I also learned that Milo and Raven would never stop without external interference. Milo was convinced his survival was dependent on Raven. His panic over losing her caused him to crack. Milo was unstable around Raven. Reading their emails, I was subjected to the same fear as Mia.

Milo was as deadly for Raven as she was lethal for him. I believed they could break this cycle with a fresh start, away from each other's venom.

After I disclosed everything about my failing organ, Milo exploded. "How many times have I told you not to drink so much? It takes thirty years of consistent drinking to fuck up your liver. Congrats! You did it in only six."

"Nine years," I corrected with fake pride. "I've been drinking for nine years."

"This is not the time to fuck around, Reid."

"Milo, I'm fine—"

"The fuck you are," he yelled. "Give me the number to your doctor's office, or are they even a legitimate doctor? At this point, I don't put it past you to hire a doctor off Groupon."

"Don't be ridiculous. I found him on Living Social."

"You think this is a joke?" Milo thundered at the top of his lungs. "You can die, Reid!"

I closed my eyes to reign in patience, but Milo was delving into protective mode, which usually came with a lot of scolding. As he yelled, Milo multi-tasked on his phone and was already dialing a number. "I need to speak to Dr. Sunny Gupta," Milo barked on the phone, no doubt ready to throw his money and name around. "I don't care if he is with someone. Tell him it's Milo Sinclair and to get his ass on the phone if he wants to see the next donation check clear."

I smiled. Milo would always be Mr. Fix-it.

When I was young, we went to a nearby diner. A distracted waitress, who was on her phone, dropped hot soup on me. It took one startled scream for Milo to spring into action and have her fired, indicating he might have her children taken away to be placed under foster care. He gave her a lecture, something about an inattentive person, precarious moments, and a menace to children. It didn't matter Milo was thirteen. It certainly didn't matter when the waitress sniped back about not having children.

When Milo turned protective, it was best not to be in his path.

Dr. Gupta came on the line to say he'd call Milo back out of respect for a pending appointment. I wondered if Milo would exploit the doctor's job security or threaten his unborn children. "I don't care if you have an appointment right now," Milo said sharply. "Do you want me to call the medical director and have your ass fired for not answering a few simple questions?"

Job security it was.

"Or do you want me to have the dean pull the admission letter to Stanford for your kid? If I can get your idiot son admitted, I can get him pulled out of there, too."

Double whammy. It was nice to see the passion in whatever you did.

The doctor conceded, and Milo grilled him. Upon exhausting the doctor's expertise, he hung up without saying goodbye.

What followed was Milo's relentless campaign, calling various transplant clinics for information on the waitlist process. I was positive he was hinting at bribes to be expedited.

By nightfall, Milo was marginally calm. An understanding passed that I'd stay the night. Presently, Raven was too tunnel-visioned to notice my absence.

Wordlessly, Milo dialed another number, this time to order takeout. Rummaging through his luggage, he handed me a birthday gift—a game console.

For the rest of the night, we hung out like two typical brothers, pushing away the grim topics to reunite us in the first place.



I dutifully stayed at Milo's condo last night while he spent an overzealous amount online. Between Milo's work and my Baltimore stint, it was the

most interaction we've had in months.

All morning, Milo had been quiet, the reality of my situation settling in.

"Milo," I started, "I need something from you."

He looked up, eyes red and rimmed. "Anything."

"I want you to leave. You used to talk about moving to California. You should do it."

Milo blinked. The uncomfortable silence stretched for minutes. At long last, he asked, "Do you hate me that much?"

Shaking my head, I sat on the stool across from him, trying to organize my thoughts.

"Quite the opposite. I love you despite everything," I admitted. "I think it'll be good for you not to be responsible for such a needy family."

"I'm not leaving you at a time like this."

"Milo, we are not children anymore. It's ridiculous for you to take care of us and pay our bills. Dad can go back to work full-time. I have a job offer as well. Everything will be fine, but I'm worried you won't be if this continues."

I had been skirting around this topic since last night. If Milo had distanced himself from us, he wouldn't have this need for Raven to save him. As for Raven, she was simply experiencing Stockholm Syndrome. With adequate time and space, I was confident in my ability to change her perspective.

"You're wrong," Milo argued. "That's not it. I made a mistake with Mia, but I can fix things with her. Raven and I can put our differences aside as well."

"Milo, you are terrorizing the women in our family," I reminded sharply. "Mia doesn't want to see you. Raven is scared shitless. All of us think she is engaging in self-harm. We all love you for everything you have done, but maybe you need to do some soul-searching—"

“Soul searching?” he scoffed.

“If you take the time to reflect without all these distractions, you can figure out what’s causing you to unravel. It’s not just Mia and Raven. You should break contact with everyone, at least for a while. You care too much, Milo.”

“Reid, you could die if I—”

“Dude, stop. You are ruining your life by being around us and hers, too. I don’t want to see either of you like this.”

Ignoring everything else I just pointed out, Milo declared, “I am not moving to California.”

“There’s only one thing I need from you right now—Leave!” I yelled with disparity. “If you are around... thinking about how all of us are making you miserable, it will only make me nervous about the next time you fall apart. I’ll get angry every time I see you with her. Just do this for me while I go through this process.”

“No. You need me right now.”

“Raven will shun you forever if she finds out you put your hands on Mia.”

Milo’s eyes promised the wrath of a rupture. For a second, I wondered if he’d try to choke me, too. Except, he paused. “She really doesn’t want to see me?” he asked instead.

“Raven said she left you a note to explain.” My lids lifted slightly to meet his eyes before I quickly averted his gaze.

With a minute nod, Milo mulled over my words.

“Maybe after some time apart from her and this family, you’ll feel differently,” I suggested before blurting out, “Five years.”

Milo’s wrath momentarily dispersed, face riddled with confusion instead.

“Five years is the minimum sentence you can get for...”

Milo's eyes flickered. He knew what I was insinuating as he had referenced it in one of his emails to Raven. Five years was the minimum sentence for rape charges.

"If you stay away for another year, that's five years. Do that much, and I promise to make Mia understand so she won't stand in your way."

"I don't care what Mia has to say to Raven."

"Then do you care about how Raven suffers around you?"

To give him the last push, I took some photos out of my back pocket and handed them to him. Raven and I found a polaroid camera in the house and went overboard.

"I want to show you something," I told him.

"She looks happy," he commented, fingers grazing over a photo of Raven.

"She is," I responded, omitting that I had forced her to dress up and wear makeup for a birthday photo session. Next, I tied the visual with my showstopper, another polaroid photo. I handed him a picture of Raven from her first day of arrival. "Here is a photo of her after I picked her up."

Milo's eyes widened, and he visibly shuddered upon noticing the difference. Even his mouth hung open slightly. A picture could say a thousand words, and it was saying much more than any logical argument I could make. The visual comparison was readily available to him.

Raven was at least five pounds lighter that day, reflected in her tiny frame. She wasn't wearing any makeup, so all the dark bruises and circles under her eyes were visible.

"I don't know how else to say this, but you two are terrible for one another. Milo, if anything happens to me—"

"Nothing's going to happen to you. I won't let it."

"I know," I mumbled. "But if it does, I don't want my last thoughts revolving around this. It's too damn sad. I want to be around our family, but

I can't deal with the drama that comes with you and Raven. I'm sorry. Milo, what if she does something worse... what if she attempts—"

Milo didn't let me finish the thought. Mostly because he couldn't bear the thought himself, so Milo did the only thing he could.

He argued with me.

I remained silent.

He yelled at me.

I let him.

Milo didn't want a world without Raven in it. If he stuck around, and she continued to engage in self-harm, there might be a world without Raven. Milo knew as much. It was written all over his face, but he needed a scapegoat to take out his anger.

So, I didn't mind playing the villain to give them a better life because I understood. I had also been drowning in an addiction of my own for years.

In the end, Milo agreed, bitterness seeping through every fiber of his being.

When it was time for me to leave, we parted on a manly handshake. Before I could turn around, Milo grabbed me to pull me into a hug. He held on to me tightly, as he used to when I was little.

Then Milo did something he had never done before. A trickle of wetness rolled down the back of my neck.

Never in my twenty-two years of life had Milo cried. For the first time in his life, my brother was crying, and it was because he was scared of losing me.

"Don't fucking die," he whispered.

"Redeem your damn soul," I found myself replying.

With those words, I did the one thing I hadn't done before. I shed a tear.

So, there we were, two grown-ass men, shedding a tear or two as we parted ways to give each other our best chances at a better life.

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PATIENCE

Raven,

In the last few months, I have woken up daily thinking the same thing; today will be better than yesterday. I have to force myself to crawl through the hours to make it to the finish line. I go to sleep and hate waking up, only to do it all over again.

We have spoken so many times this summer without finding feasible ways to move forward. It continuously circles back to the same discussion. Every time you ask me why I left so abruptly, the thought of you doing something to hurt yourself comes rushing back. I can't stop myself from hurting people I love, nor can I stop you from hurting yourself.

So, I lie and let you believe that I left to free myself of this family's obligations. While it wasn't the reason, it has proven to be a perk.

Does it make me selfish to feel this way?

Reid handed me a gift to leave without a guilty conscience. He was right. I have never known myself as devoid of the commitment of being the head of a household. Carrying the weight of so many needy people was making

me irrational time and time again. Well-wishers as they might be, without our parents' presence, I no longer feel overextended.

I'm more in control of myself now, but all the same, being unable to fix things is driving me crazy. My need to be needed is as big of a crutch as their need for me. I don't trust them to make good decisions and would rather run the lives of our family members.

How fucked up is that?

As I come to that conclusion, I realize I want to know who I can be around you without that constant pent-up frustration. I plan to maintain my distance from them if we are to reunite. I just don't know when that will be, but I know it has to be after Reid's ordeal and after you stop hurting yourself. Every time I think about how you tried to stab yourself... If anything happened to you, I couldn't exist in this world. The hope for a better future will be gone for good, and I can't lose the only hope keeping me going in my otherwise lonely existence.

This wait is excruciating. I keep taking random trips and embarking on adventures to fill every second I'm not working. But between the shuffle of filling every minute in my calendar, there are seconds left empty. Those seconds are filled with the sound of your voice to the point that I can't fucking breathe. Every second is more complicated than the second before.

If possible, I love you more than before.

-Milo

CHAPTER 4

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THE PRESENT
A YEAR WITH YOU - SUMMER 2021



Milo

THE WARM SUN ON MY FACE MADE ME SQUINT MY EYES, WHILE RAVEN'S cool skin kept my body at the perfect temperature. I was drowsy from the soft rocking of the hammock we were lying on.

Following Alexa's party, the remaining guests returned to America, most of whom would return in a few weeks for Alexa's wedding. However, Raven and I discussed extending our stay in Mexico to take things slow and work out our issues.

That was before we practically moved in together and after we had sex.

I canceled my booking to stay with Raven, which had been informational now that we shared a bedroom instead of merely living under the same roof. For example, Raven organized everything under the moon, down to her shoes and purses. She was shocked others didn't organize their closet by color.

Somehow that made me love her more.

Raven was obsessed with Sacha Baron Cohen and made me watch his new movies. I didn't care for them.

I remained a fan of old Western movies and made Raven sit through grueling hours of it. She pouted throughout, dying of boredom.

Raven had developed a new habit of staring at me while I slept. I had developed a new habit of taking excessive photos of Raven on my phone.

The other day, I was in the shower for ten minutes. Raven used the opportunity to surprise me with a grilled cheese sandwich using the suite's kitchenette. Raven was still a terrible cook. After that, I implemented a new rule—she wasn't allowed in the kitchenette alone.

"Your lemonade, Senorita," the busboy placed the drink on the table next to the hammock. Fishing into the pockets of my shorts, I extended a few pesos to him.

"Gracias," Raven mumbled without lifting her head off my chest.

We were on the hammocks in front of Raven's oceanfront suite. We left the sliding doors ajar to keep an eye on her dog. Though we had gone on a few outings around the city, nothing beat the current view.

Looking down at my chest, I found Raven peeking up.

"Do you think you'll get up long enough to enjoy your drink?"

Large, dark sunglasses covered half of Raven's face. She mockingly extended her arm toward the lemonade without attempting to seize it.

"I tried. It's too far away," Raven slurred between her beach-induced sleepy state.

"Baby, stop trying so hard. You might pull a muscle," I retorted dryly.

Raven flashed me a set of white teeth, cradling herself back into my arms. However, as soon as she got a whiff of the food I had ordered and took a sip of her lemonade, she was like a baby panda full of curiosity.

This was usually the time of the day when Raven pestered me with an array of questions about my new life in California. Today's line of questions was no different.

“How difficult will it be if you want to sell your condo in L.A.?”

“Not difficult.”

“Does your condo have HOA fees?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you know HOA fees go up yearly, making luxury condos very difficult to sell at times?”

“Riveting information.”

“Did you sign up for cable and internet?”

“Obviously.”

“Is it a long-term contract?”

“No.”

“You say that now, but cable companies are tricky. Before you realize it, you’re on the hook for a three-year commitment.”

“Good to know.”

Raven lifted her head off my chest. “You know why I’m asking you these questions, right?”

Running a few fingers through her hair, I let Raven ride out the misery for a little longer before admitting, “My old condo in Soho is all set for my move back to New York.”

If Raven was surprised, the emotion was hidden behind her dark sunglasses. “Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

“And spoil your daily afternoon activity to figure out if I’m moving back to New York?”

Raven bit her lips with a sly smile to stop them from curling fully. “And what if I had said I already made arrangements to move to California?”

“Then I’d say, my home is where you are.”

This time Raven's face lit up. Under her breath, she timidly muttered my words back before nuzzling her face against my neck. For the remaining afternoon, Raven didn't ask any more questions.



Raven

I had lots of erotic dreams about Milo. It was a normal part of my nightly routine.

Today's dream started with the covers being pulled down. The soft material glided down my bare legs until I felt the cool air hitting my skin. Milo shifted to kiss my inner thighs. The light, airy kisses made their way to where I needed him to be, but he was agonizingly slow tonight. Punishing me.

I squirmed to rush the movements, but the bastard continued to drag his tongue against my inner thigh, leaving a wet path.

I moaned this time, fingers grasping at the sheets underneath me. I was soaked, grinding myself against imaginary friction. Milo dropped more gentle kisses all over my face.

Even in my slumber, I suddenly recognized this touch was too possessive to be a dream. When Milo bit my neck, it jolted me fully awake. My eyes snapped open to find a pair of emerald eyes staring down.

A vision of monstrosity took over when I realized Milo was rocking in and out of me.

On instinct, I started clawing at him, unable to verbalize my dread.

"Rave, what's wrong?" Milo froze on top of me, face etched with concern.

This time, I let out a stifled shriek. My brain screamed this wasn't a threat, while my limbs unintentionally lashed out. Eyes wide, Milo grabbed my wrists.

“Shit. Raven, we were just... you don’t remember?”

Bits and pieces of conscious memory flooded my mind.

After we decided to move to the same city, Milo insisted on a celebratory beachside dinner, followed by hours of sex afterward. I was grappling with consciousness between our sessions, going in and out, tethering at the edge of reality versus fantasy. In my fantasy, Milo’s hands roamed my body, setting every inch of my skin on fire. I responded to it in reality, so he thought I was lucid and continued.

Except I wasn’t. I woke up reliving a familiar nightmare, one I hadn’t encountered in months.

Reading the cues, Milo whispered, “Please, baby. It’s just you and me.” His eyes searched mine, imploring me to focus on this moment by shutting off the rest.

When I still couldn’t articulate a word, Milo dipped his head until his lips grazed the shell of my ear. “We recently got married in Greece,” he murmured.

My whole body tensed, unsure where he was going with this.

“And we moved to our renovated condo in Soho afterward.”

I stared at Milo blankly while he whispered more possibilities from the parallel universe we had once created.

“Everyone we love is okay and happy.”

“Reid found himself a new girlfriend.”

“You are a huge success, so I quit my job to become your trophy husband. I am practically your housewife now.”

Regardless of the irrational scare, I smiled. When my body relaxed, Milo pulled out and whispered more pacifying words. Sensing a small tear leaking out of the corner of my eye and rolling onto my cheek, Milo kissed it away.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Nothing.” And that was truly the answer.

Milo didn’t believe in it, but there was something called happy tears. I was sad because I might never be this happy again. It was as if my soul had been reconnected to its missing part. Like I was finally home after a long time away.

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CHAPTER 5



Raven

“THE UPSTAIRS BATHROOM BROKE DOWN AGAIN,” MY MOTHER WAILED.

“Then call a plumber, Mom.” I held onto my temple with two fingers.

This video chat had only commenced, and my migraine was already exercising its full visitation rights. Despite my international residence, I maintained a daily video call with both sets of parents, primarily to moderate their ill-advised actions.

“They’ll never give us a good price. You are better at dealing with these things. Can’t you just call them?”

“Honey, which card should I use for the new fridge?” my father chimed in next.

“Dad, the old fridge works just fine.”

“Water leaks out of it whenever we push the button for ice.”

“Then use an ice cube tray.” I ground my teeth.

While Dad worked on reinstating his medical license, my parents continued to live with the Sinclairs, but they were running low on funds. I created a

budget sheet for them, but Dad followed it selectively.

“Is that Raven?” Tessa’s voice floated through the video on my computer, but she was only visible from the neck down.

“Tessa, you need to sit down so I can see you,” I suggested.

The phone in my hand buzzed, concurrent to Tessa’s onset into the conversation. Alexa’s name flashed on the screen, likely reaching out about the wedding flowers. I silenced the phone, intending to call her back later.

“Raven, sweetie,” Tessa’s voice cracked, eyes brimming with unshed tears. “Is Milo there? Can we talk to him?”

I had come to detest this specific part of our conversation.

In the last few weeks, Milo and I picked up where we left off. Our weeks had been filled with laughter and teasing.

Milo remained averse to my dog but didn’t make that disgruntled face anymore. Since the time Milo soothed my nightmare away, I’d rarely had subconscious reactions to him.

The couple of times I retreated, Milo mollified me and endured my night-terror-induced attacks. Twice, he had woken up covered in bruises and scratches. The guilt ate me, but Milo insisted he was fine.

Milo’s considerations left me vigilant to return the favor.

So far, his only request was to remain in our created bubble. Besides the gym, short walks for my dog, and lounging around the beach, we didn’t venture far anymore, not even for food. We lived off resort meals and room service.

News had traveled to our families that Milo was here with me. They missed him dearly, and his parents were unsure why Milo had cut them out of his life.

I glanced outside the transparent double doors. Milo was lounging on a beach chair, counting down to the minute I hung up.

“Tessa,” I started softly, “we talked about this, remember?”

My phone buzzed again, announcing an incoming text.

Alexa: Call me.

My attention was diverted when Tessa sniffled. “I know, sweetie,” she said in a small voice. “But maybe he’ll change his mind if you ask him again. I just want to talk to him. Please, Raven.”

My severe migraine was nothing compared to the pain in my chest. “I’ll try again,” I hoarsely whispered as Tessa walked out of the room with a brief, understanding nod. I abhorred these moments, knowing I’d have to break Tessa’s heart again when Milo refused.

My mother started talking again when Uncle Reese walked into the room. “Hi, honey.”

“Hi, Uncle Reese.”

“Raven, is Milo there? Can we speak to him?” he asked, oblivious of Tessa’s earlier plea mere seconds ago. My phone lit up precisely as he voiced his inquiry.

Alexa: PICK UP!

Following the text, Alexa started calling me.

“Yeah?” I finally answered Alexa’s call.

“Rave, did you tell the florist to add the extra centerpieces?” Alexa asked while Uncle Reese clarified, “Yeah? He wants to talk to us?”

Fuck.

“No!” I hurriedly shouted at the screen. His disappointed face resembled a kid who lost his Halloween candy to a bully. “I’m sorry.”

“Raven, what the hell! I asked you to reach out to them days ago,” Alexa cried out.

Double fuck. “Alexa, I did talk to the florist. You’re all set.”

“Then why did you say no?”

Before I could respond, Mom cut in. “Honey, where did we land on the plumber? Can I expect you to take care of that?”

“Mom,” I said exasperatedly, “there are a million bathrooms in the house. Can’t you just use a different one?”

“What bathroom are you talking about?” Alexa asked in a frustrated tone over the phone. “Also, I have received four complaints about the online orders not going through. Can you double-check our website isn’t frozen?”

“So, I’ll go ahead and order the fridge then?” Dad asked.

“Let’s wait until I’m back in New York,” I exclaimed.

“We can’t put our business on pause for that long,” Alexa screeched on the phone.

“We are not. I’ll call you right back.” I hung up on Alexa before she could protest.

“You will call us right back?” my mother asked. “Okay, honey.” Mom ended the video chat before I could open my mouth to scold them about buying a ten-thousand-dollar fridge.

I shut the computer lid with force, covered my face with both hands, and let out the loudest scream.

Milo grabbed the hands covering my face and kissed my knuckles. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

He had just walked through the double doors, still sopping wet from his earlier swim. I looked at the sand he dragged behind. Upon following my trail of vision, Milo sheepishly smiled.

“Nothing,” I mumbled. “Alexa called. She’s just a demanding bride.” I didn’t want to risk putting Milo off more by bringing up family drama.

While Milo claimed his hesitancy to contact his parents stemmed from years of resentment and the desire for a clean break, Milo's actions were so

uncharacteristic I was constantly searching for the missing puzzle piece.

Getting into Milo's head was harder than opening a coconut with a butter knife. There was only one person capable of reading him. If Mia were here, she'd figure out what Milo was thinking.

Milo and Mia had a bizarre feud. Mia was upset upon learning the specifics of our unsettling history. Although they recently made up, I suspected there was more to it than met the eye, and their relationship played a role in Milo shying away from the rest of the clan.

"What happened between you and Mia?" I asked abruptly. "Is she the reason you don't want to talk to your parents..." I let the sentence dwindle.

Milo merely watched me instead of elaborating.

"Tessa and Uncle Reese ask about you every day. Whatever happened, there is no point in burning bridges with your family over petty grudges."

Tessa hadn't spoken to Milo in over a year. Before our reconciliation, she asked me daily if I had spoken to him. Tessa might have led a sick life crippled by her mental health issues, but she loved her son. They said parents weren't supposed to have favorites, but the Sinclairs sure did.



Milo

In the last few weeks, Raven and I had finally found peace between the beach and our suite. As always, the rude awakening was my goddamn family.

Raven shook her head. "I know you are lying to me about something. You have no interest in talking to them, but I don't understand what exactly happened—"

I sighed exasperatedly. "Baby..."

She mocked me by sighing back with similar irritation. "Yes, baby?"

I smirked at her playfulness. Leaning down, I pressed a kiss on her lips. “They don’t matter. Can we drop this?”

“Of course, they matter. They are our family. We can’t exactly avoid them for the rest of our lives.” She nibbled on my lip and tried to tickle me while I slinked away.

“I just don’t want to be around them.”

Raven inspected my guise, trying to break through it. If she kept it up, she might be successful.

An idea popped into my head. “Pack your things,” I demanded to distract her from that brain of hers.

“Why?”

“Because we are moving to a villa. Those are much bigger, and we need the space.” I motioned at the chaos surrounding us. The number of things Raven brought for her dog barely left any uncovered surface in her suite.

I took out my phone and texted my personal assistant to rebook my previous villa. There was a handicap to those villas. They were so remote they barely received Wi-Fi signal.

My schedule was clear for the next few months, besides conference calls that I could easily join over the phone. As for Raven, her work required a pencil and a sketchbook, not the internet. For everything else, her phone should work, but video chats likely would not. It wasn’t much, but it would downplay our family’s capability to interrupt our time in Mexico.

“I thought you canceled that room.”

“I’m having it re-booked. I don’t think we can continue living here. There isn’t even enough space for us to get dressed.”

When my phone beeped, I lifted it to read the message. “Good. My PA just booked it,” I said. “Get your things together, and I’ll bring the car around after I’m done.” I nodded toward the side table. “Hand me the extra key card. I’ll also check out of this room and check into the other one.”

Raven hesitated before mumbling, “Fine,” and handed me a copy of her key card. Walking to the closet, she started packing as I towed off the sand.

My heart warmed when I found Raven dutifully packing my bags as well. Raven was unhappy with my lack of explanations for ignoring my parents. The simple truth was—I enjoyed the freedom without their pestering presence and would like to continue living in this bubble we had created.

I kissed the crown of her head and murmured a few appreciative words for being so understanding. I didn’t leave the room until she was giggling, telling me to hurry back.



Raven

“I can feel your damn eyes on me again,” Milo grumbled without peeling open his eyelids.

I smiled instead of responding.

Milo had never been a morning person. It irritated him when I stared at him, but in the last few weeks, almost every morning had started just like this.

“You know, it’s super fucking creepy to stare at someone while they sleep.”

Where Milo said creepy, I said sweet. Untangling one hand from under the pillow, I brushed the hair off his forehead. His lips curved while his eyes remained closed.

Milo lifted his head slightly off the pillow. “Come here.” He yanked me to his chest with my face landing in the hollow of his neck. His furnace-like body wrapped around mine within seconds, securing me in a tight embrace.

“I’m deeply disturbed by your behavior,” he mumbled groggily with his lips against my temple. “I’ll never rest easy, knowing your probing eyes are around the corner. You have to make this up to me.”

I looked up to be greeted by his unshaven jaw and strong Adam's apple. "What did you have in mind?"

Milo barked a laugh at my curious face. "Get your dirty head out of the gutter, perv."

"Hmm." I hummed and fluttered my eyes, struggling to adjust to the sunlight seeping through the window. "It's so bright in here."

Milo grabbed the remote from the side table and pressed a button to close the automated shades.

We moved into this villa last night. Milo checked in and got settled first since I had a lot to pack, mostly Mr. Whiskers' items. It was late and dark by the time he picked me up.

I hardly had the chance to drop Mr. Whiskers' crate in the living room yesterday when Milo dragged me to bed, so I hadn't had the opportunity to inspect the place.

"I like the customer service here," I joked. "The turnaround time for guest complaints is impeccable. I didn't have to fill out a comment card."

"We aim to please here at Milo's casa," he playfully responded.

"Ew. Did you just refer to yourself in the third person?"

"Maybe." He nuzzled my neck. "What do you want for breakfast?" When I lifted an unsure shoulder, Milo prodded, determined to feed me. "You barely ate anything yesterday."

"You'll laugh if I tell you what I want for breakfast."

"Why would I laugh?"

"I don't know."

"I'm not going to laugh. Tell me what you want."

"Chocolate cake."

Milo laughed heartily.

“You said you wouldn’t laugh,” I reprimanded with an elbow jab.

“It’s a no to the chocolate cake, but we can have a normal people’s breakfast. I have to answer some emails. Why don’t you shower in the meanwhile, then we can eat?” He tapped my butt with his hand.

“Okay,” I said in between a yawn. The cobwebs of my mind hadn’t entirely subsided. I was also naked. Looking around the floor, I reached for his sweatshirt.

Milo propped up his head. He was sporting a five o’clock shadow and looked as dirty as I felt. Messy, sex hair. Eyes slightly drowsy. Completely naked.

“Bathroom?” I mumbled, moving on unsteady legs with the sweatshirt reaching past my thighs.

“Through there.” He pointed to one of the two doors in the room. “See you in a bit.” He kissed me on the cheek before heading out of the room.

I walked around the king-size bed and held open the door Milo had pointed out, expecting the bathroom. Instead, I found myself in a spacious closet filled with men’s clothing.

My suitcase was waiting dutifully in the middle of the closet. My heart warmed a little when I realized Milo had unloaded Mr. Whiskers’ stuff from the car last night after I fell asleep. I organized a few items before heading to the larger bathroom just past the closet.

Sluggishly, I got started on my morning routine.

By the time I had finished, I resembled half a human. I prayed silently for the reprieve when I found Milo in the kitchen, looking like he was gracing humankind with his appearance.

Milo was shirtless with only a pair of low-hanging light gray sweatpants. His dark hair was unruly. Though he badly needed a shave, I secretly hoped he didn’t, having gotten used to this new, slightly edgy look.

“Hey, baby.”

“Hey,” I murmured, kissing him on my tippy toes. He leaned in with his cheek to accommodate our height difference but didn’t turn or break concentration from the task at hand.

Milo was busy mixing and dicing things. White steam evaporated from the two pans on the stovetop. Cartons of eggs and milk were scattered around the counter, and the scent of something tantalizing was in the air.

Milo was a good cook, and this villa had a fully equipped kitchen. Still, I was stunned by Milo’s choice to have the butler do a grocery run so he could cook for himself instead of having the butler do it.

“Can I help you with—”

Milo interrupted my offer with deep, rumbling laughter. “No, baby. If you burn this villa down, I don’t have the money to restore it.”

I rolled my eyes. Generally, Milo insisted I used air quotations whenever I referred to my ‘cooking.’

While Milo cooked, I opened Mr. Whiskers’ bag of food to feed him and let him out. I deviated to the full cup of coffee at the breakfast table. It was Milo’s effort to lure me away from the kitchen while the stove was turned on.

Whatever.

With an elbow on the breakfast table, I leaned my cheek against my palm and returned to my hopeless gawking.

“Rave.”

“Yeah?” I responded dreamily.

“Stop fucking staring at me!”

Snapping out of my daydream, I crossed my arms across my chest with a huff. “Are you going to tell me what you’re buttering me up for?”

Milo turned his head hastily before returning his attention to the stove. “Why would you assume I’m buttering you up?”

“Just a hunch.” My eyes roamed the ingredients on the kitchen counter. All of them were for my favorite breakfast items, scrambled eggs with cheese and chocolate chip pancakes. “Why else would you be making food?”

“Well,” Milo tapped his chin with his index finger, looking pensive, “food generally provides us with the nourishment needed to stay alive, and I’m quite fond of living. So, I thought we could partake in eating. However, I also do enjoy the chocolatey flavors and sugary syrup.”

“Har-har,” I said sarcastically while his lips tipped to one side.

Looking at the spread on the kitchen counter, I realized this was Milo’s way of making it up to me for his refusal to talk to his parents.

But I had already decided to drop the topic. There wasn’t much cell service at this villa anyways. I texted Mia last night to inform her I wouldn’t be able to hop on our daily chats.

I tapped Milo’s phone lying on the dining table alongside mine to see if his phone had signal. When I noticed he was in the same boat, I fiddled with the photo app instead, so I could find the pictures Milo took when we saw pink flamingoes during one of our excursions.

However, in place of the pink flamingoes, I only discovered photos of me.

Hundreds and hundreds of my pictures covered every inch of the app. Photos of me on the hammock. Photos of me sleeping. Photos of me eating (yuck). Photos of me swimming.

Gah!

I placed the phone down. With nothing else to distract me, I fervently tapped my fingers, fussed with my hands, and jerked my knees while waiting for him to join me. Milo threw glances as if sending me telepathic reminders to learn the virtue of patience.

My call for company was answered sooner than expected as two piled-high plates landed on the table. I clapped my hands as Milo took the seat next to me. My chair's legs screeched on the wooden floors when Milo dragged it

closer with one strong hand. My legs propped up on his lap instinctively as we leisurely picked at our food.

When we concluded eating, Milo hauled me onto his lap, making no move to end the lazy breakfast. Although we should since today was Alexa's wedding.

"What time does the wedding start?"

"We should probably get there by—"

My sentence was cut short by an unexpected loud ringing. Milo snatched my phone from the breakfast table. Within seconds, his lighthearted demeanor disappeared. I peeked to inspect a familiar caller ID flashing on the screen.

My heart stopped momentarily.

"I have to take this," I whispered apologetically, my voice going down an octave. By some miraculous luck, Milo let go instead of hurling the phone across the room. However, I wasn't fooled into thinking this conversation was over.

Dashing out the kitchen door, I stepped outside to the small patio to pick up the call out of Milo's earshot.

"Reid?" I greeted before he could say hello.

"Hello to you too, Rave."

"W-what? H-hi... w—"

"Calm down, Rave," Reid suggested without a trace of uncertainty.

My shallow exhalations adjusted to a normal pace. Like clockwork, Reid recognized the change.

"You are with him," he announced after the temporary noiselessness.

"Yes," I admitted.

Reid was quiet for so long that I pulled the phone away to inspect if we had been disconnected.

“And... it’s been okay? You are fine...” he trailed off.

“Yes, of course,” I attempted to sound casual, camouflaging my bewilderment over this call. I wasn’t supposed to hear from Reid unless for emergencies. “How are you?”

“Same old.”

“How was the last check-up?”

“Rave, don’t worry about me. I’m fine. Tell me how things have been with... you know.”

We were both quiet following his crystal-clear insinuation.

“Reid, don’t worry about me. I’m just fine,” I finally spoke, repeating his words. “Why the sudden call?”

“You told Mia you couldn’t do daily video chats with her anymore.”

I admitted that could be reason enough to raise suspicions. “Yeah. I moved to this new suite last night, and there isn’t a strong internet or data connection here. I’m surprised your call came through.”

“Oh. As long as you are okay.”

Before I could say more, Reid hung up with a curt goodbye. My mind remained in shambles. It was the last thing I expected this morning.

Worst of all, the morning wasn’t over.

After ending the call with Reid, it took everything in me to step inside.

Four minutes—the duration of the call. Milo had been stewing in anger for each of those passing minutes. To say Reid remained an unpleasant subject was putting it mildly.

Through our discussions, we uncovered a small deception on Reid’s end the last morning I saw Milo before our year-long separation. The note I thought

Reid had left in my handwriting for Mia was directed at Milo.

I held my breath as I entered the kitchen. However, Milo was nowhere to be found, and the villa was eerily quiet.

I swallowed.

My heart came to a screeching halt when I located Milo standing in the living room with his back to me. His right palm was flat on the transparent sliding glass doors, examining the clear blue ocean outside.

My footsteps disrupted his contemplations. The six-foot giant spun to tower over me with arms crossed in front of his chest.

Everything about him looked like a paradox.

The shirtless ensemble made him appear vulnerable. However, the sunlight highlighting his larger-than-life biceps resembled a threatening entity.

His stance was rigid, controlled, and precise. Yet his breathing was erratic, wild, and primitive.

He looked beautiful.

He also looked like a monster.

Like his appearance, his current mood was mercurial. Milo was unpredictable wherever jealousy was concerned. His unreadable dead expression only confirmed the fact.

“He wasn’t supposed to call,” I explained flatly.

Unable to meet his eyes, I lowered them to the floor. Milo mulled me over, his hard-set jaw ticking. His expression was cold and aloof.

“Get in the bedroom, Rave,” he finally chewed out.

“Milo, please,” I whispered. “We should talk about this.”

“Go. To. The. Bedroom,” Milo enunciated each word.

Ignoring my heart palpitations, I moved my heavy legs in that direction. I could barely hear Milo's stealthy footsteps trailing mine, which only heightened my paranoia.

All my senses were alert. My heart was beating so fast it might break my chest open.

When I reached the middle of the room, I heard the bedroom door shut behind me and the click of the lock. Keeping my back to the door, I waited for him to say something.

I stayed rooted on rigid feet, afraid any movement might set him off. The lack of ability to see the figure behind only heightened the ominous tension between us.

I turned to find Milo standing a few feet away, looking larger than life. Fury danced in his eyes as he watched me with a stoic expression.

When he spoke, his voice was entirely devoid of emotions. "On the bed."

I didn't argue. I climbed onto the middle of the bed and pulled my bare knees to my chest.

"Off." Milo nodded his head at my sweatshirt. "Get on your back."

His darkened gaze fixed on me as I peeled the sweatshirt off. Scratching his rough stubble, Milo watched me under hooded eyes while I laid flat, and he rid himself of his sweatpants.

Milo's silent presence was worse than if he were to yell. It was freaking me out that I couldn't read him at all.

Milo pressed one knee on the bed. I almost stopped breathing when the mattress dipped under his weight. A large hand wrapped around my ankle. Without warning, Milo yanked, dragging my ass across the bed, my legs dangling off the edge. His broad, naked build shadowed my smaller one as if he were an otherworldly specimen.



Milo

A volcanic fury was emanating from me.

It was easy to ignore the elephant in the room until it was blaring on her phone. She left the goddamn room to take his call.

What was so private that couldn't be discussed in front of me?

The thought alone set off this unraveling madness. Leaning down, I wrapped my hand around Raven's ankle and yanked her toward me until her legs hung limply off the edge.

"Milo, you are scaring me," Raven whispered. Her face was pinned under me with my elbows on either side. "Why are you so quiet?"

Raven didn't shudder, cower, or shy away from me anymore. The last thing I wanted was for her to fear me again, but if I spoke, I was afraid it might be worse.

My chest rose and fell as my eyes trailed her naked skin. Adrenaline was pumping through my veins like a barbarian on the hunt. This lust was nothing if not savage.

Raven remained unmoving as she watched me with apprehension.

I parted her legs with my knee. Without a word, I grabbed my dick and stroked it between her folds. The head of my cock rubbed against her until I was hard enough to burst. Until her pool of moisture covered my cock. Precum dripped out of me, making her wetter by mixing with her juices.

When I slanted my face to meet her mouth, Raven was kissing me just as greedily.



Raven

Milo didn't push inside. Instead, he rubbed against me until my pussy pulsed and throbbed and ached. With a hand under my lower back, he broke our kiss and flipped me on my stomach, so I was bent over the edge of the bed while he remained standing next to it. The bed was too high. My floppy feet struggled to find the floor. Before I could get my bearing, Milo parted my thighs and sheathed himself deep inside with enough force to make me scream.

My toes curled, and my body instantly surrendered. A tousled moan seeped out, goosebumps breaking out at his earthy groan.

"Fuck," he grunted.

I hissed when Milo twisted his hand into my locks. He grabbed a fistful of hair and pulled on it until my back was curved. The angle granted him access to invade deeper, letting me feel every ridge of his cock. Searing pain shot through my prickling scalp, with Milo tightening his grasp and rigidly yanking at my hair. I momentarily lost sight when soft tendrils broke free from his hold to frame my face and cover my eyes.

Milo's cheek rested next to my mine. His shallow breaths tickled me as he tilted his face to press feathery light kisses. The airy sensation contrasted with his merciless thrusts, driving long, hard strokes inside me with brute force. I could barely find solid ground for balance and reached for the mattress to support my body weight. I only moved an inch when Milo viciously pulled my hair again to keep me in place.

When Milo hit a spot that blurred my vision, I didn't bother to decipher how I was upright. It was hard to pay attention with him fucking me so hard.

"Oh, God, Milo," I panted, digging my nails into the arm banded around my waist.

I was afraid of the slightest shift that might stop the friction from hitting the spot I urgently needed. My body locked while I desperately climbed my peak. The swell of my breasts rose and fell, my lungs scalding.

“Fu—” my lips parted, but the frenzy hit me too fast to continue. All I saw was pure bliss. All I heard was a ringing. My face clenched as I dragged a huge gulp of air. My mouth remained open, though I didn’t blow out the breath despite my lungs burning.

“Breathe,” Milo reminded me when I still hadn’t exhaled.

My eyes flew open when Milo suddenly retracted, leaving me empty inside. Taken back, I looked over my shoulders to find Milo lifting my limp legs onto the bed. He placed me on all fours on my shaky knees and hands. I couldn’t think before Milo grabbed my butt cheeks to spread them wide and dipped his face between my ass cheeks.

“Milo, wha— Jesus.” An expert tongue raided my senses as it swiped over my puckered hole. “Oh, God!”

Milo kept licking my rim forcefully before soothing it with gentle flicks. It was like fire and ice. The relentless tongue pushed against the sensitive nerve bundles, wetting them until I was panting and wanton.

My legs continued quaking when Milo moved his head back. He shoved his cock inside my pussy again, pounding into me.

Without forewarning, he slid a finger all the way inside my ass.

“Fuck,” I sobbed. My body crumpled from the intrusion, my upper body sinking to the mattress. Milo dipped his knee onto the bed to chase after me.



Milo

Raven’s face rested against the mattress. After her body went boneless, I rose to my knees, lifting her lower body with an arm around her waist.

Raven panted. Her knees were wobbly and knocking together. She didn’t get much time to acclimate before I spread her legs wider to sink into her further. I didn’t stop until I was buried so deep her slippery wetness coated

my balls. Her cunt squeezed my cock while her ass suffocated my finger. She was full of me in every way.

I pushed my finger in and out of her ass slowly despite pounding her tight pussy like there was no tomorrow. The harder I thrust into her, the more I felt it wasn't enough. I needed more to exact my possession over her. So much more.

It was these thoughts that had me pulling my finger out. Before her rosebud could contract, I shoved two fingers inside. Raven cried out again, not expecting the merciless attack. This time I was prepared. My arm was around her waist to keep her in place.

"You good, baby?" I breathed against her ear, giving her a moment to recuperate.

Raven whimpered in my hold. When I saw the tears stinging her eyes, I moved to retract my fingers, but she stopped me. "Don't. I'm fine. Just give me a second."

My heart was beating like wild drums at her admission. My blood was heated. My insides were on fire.

I was driven by unwarranted jealousy. Reid was, in fact, the reason for our reunion. All the same, I had this manic need to demonstrate our bond was greater than theirs.

I started fucking her harder, this time with my lubricated fingers in her backdoor, keeping the same rough pace. Reaching the side table drawer with my free hand, I retrieved the bottle of lube. I pulled my cock out to smear lube on it. Raven looked over her shoulders in confusion. As an answer to her unposed question, I pulled my fingers out of her ass, and without giving Raven a chance to clench her cheeks, I pressed the head of my dick into her pink asshole.

Raven stilled, her body screaming in protest. I gave her a moment to state objections. When she didn't voice any, I plunged forward.

My dick was still glistening from her wet, slick arousal mixed with the lube. I watched with awe as the head moved inside her tight ring of muscles.

“Breathe, baby. Take your time.”

Raven blew a harsh breath, but I stiffened when she clawed the bedsheet searching for an anchor. “Ow,” Raven yelped. “Fuck... that hurts,” she gritted through her teeth.

“Take a deep breath and exhale slowly,” I whispered while panting to gain control. It was taking everything to keep from ramming inside her. But Raven hadn’t done this before. Last night, I used a small sex toy on her, but nothing big enough to get her used to my size.

Raven let out a long breath this time. Her inner muscles instinctively relaxed, letting me in a little further.

“Jesus,” I groaned, “you’re killing me.” This is the tightest grip I had felt. Tighter than her pussy.

I dropped the other hand around her waist to stroke her clit. Her ass stretched again, letting me slip another inch deeper.

“That’s it, baby,” I commended through clenched teeth.

Raven was on her elbows, face resting against the mattress, ass in the air. I was only halfway in. My pace was snail-like, but her hold on me made it goddamn near impossible.

Every time her muscles adapted, I eased forward.

Raven’s body suddenly locked up, unable to take any more. A couple of lone tears dribbled down to the sheets underneath. I worked her clit faster until her pussy vibrated against my fingers, the pleasure dominating her pain.

“That... fuck, Milo... feels good,” her breathless words drove me to the brink.

“Holy fuck,” I grunted, my voice echoing through the room and my cock pulsing.

We were both struggling to breathe when Raven tilted her face to look at me. Her face clenched. My dick throbbed. I saw the veins on her neck protruding while I fought the urge to come, praying for a semblance of control.

I swiped at her engorged clit until her ass dilated again, allowing my final advance.

By the time I buried myself deep inside her, I was growling and grunting with her ass choking my dick. I stroked her swollen clit faster. The erotic sounds she made had me thrusting, though I could barely move with that death-clutch grip.

“I am close,” I faltered, struggling to speak, feeling consumed by her.

“Oh, God. Don’t stop,” Raven moaned like she was about to lose her shit.

I couldn’t hold back any longer. I picked up the pace, pelvis smacking against her ass. My eyes rolled to the back of my head, and my sensations came alive. This was the most intense experience of my life. My mind blanked, muscles straining.

“Fuck, baby, fuck!” I growled like a lust-crazed maniac, saying incoherent things as ecstasy shot through me.

“Right there... I am so close... Milo,” Raven panted just as vigorously. Suddenly Raven shuddered, screaming her head off.

“I am going to come.” I barely held on while Raven convulsed before erupting violently. Pulling out, I drenched her ass with my cum.

Raven let out a hiss from the sudden withdrawal. I kept stroking my dick until her ass, thigh, back, and every part of her body was covered in me. Marking her. I kept going and going until my lungs burned.

Raven collapsed face forward on the mattress, and I followed her down, covering her with my body. It was only when she grumbled that I shifted my weight. My face rested between her shoulder blades, pressing gentle kisses every so often.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

Raven was still breathing harshly. “I’m fine.”

“Did I hurt you?”

She laughed a little, tugging at my heartstrings. “Only in my asshole.”

I chuckled, shocked she wasn’t angry with my impulsivity. “I’ll take care of you,” I murmured. I pressed another kiss, not caring about lying on the sticky mess smeared on her body.

After a serene moment, Raven gently asked, “Do you want to talk about—”

“No,” I cut her off.

While it angered me, I could never break Raven and Reid’s emotional bond. So, I could do no more than rely on the only bond they didn’t share.



Raven

“This way.” Milo rounded the Jeep to pull the passenger door open.

After the events of this morning, we slept off the warring tension. I was mentally drained more than physically. I had barely opened my eyes when Milo dragged me out of bed for a bath and practically dressed me before piling me into his Jeep.

The wedding ceremony and reception were both at our resort, but the resort was so huge it made more sense to drive. The ceremony was as romantic as one would imagine a beachfront wedding with an ocean backdrop. Afterward, guests were to indulge in an hour-long cocktail party, followed by a dinner. The cocktail hour and the reception were ensuing on the other end of the resort. So, once again, Milo drove his rental.

I followed Milo out of the Jeep and fell into step next to him. Stopping in front of the reception venue, I looked at a structure that could only be

described as a cross between a barn and a cabin.

“Do you plan to murder me and leave me here?”

Milo held open the entrance door for me with a leisurely smile. “Night’s still young. Let’s see how things go.”

“You are hilarious,” I replied dryly.

Milo guided me indoors with a hand on my lower back. The cocktail party was taking place out back, so the event coordinators at the entrance ushered us.

As we neared the double doors leading outside, our ears filled with the sounds of laughter. We walked through the double doors to find ourselves transported to a different world—an enchanted forest.

Farm tables with lanterns were set up under the shades of trees: pine, oak, and cypress. Bistro lights hung from corner to corner. Hundreds of LED candles lighted the pathway. The look was completed with outdoor lounge furniture and hammocks.

“Wow,” I marveled. When I looked at the sky, I saw the greens from the top of the tall trees with specs of light peeking through. Birds chirped and flew across the trees.

I was so captivated I barely heard the shutter-click sound on Milo’s phone. “Did you just take another photo of me?”

He smiled craftily. “Yes, I took one picture.” Milo held out his hand for me. “Come on.”

Milo led us to the welcome table so we could drop an envelope in the card box, our gift to the happy couple. Premade signature cocktails were lined up there, which we grabbed after writing our good wishes in the guestbook.

I stole glances at Milo while strolling to the high-top bar tables. This was the first time we were out in public in some time. I could sense the change in pace put him on edge, especially after this morning. I gave him the most reassuring smile I could muster and squeezed his hand resting on the table.

After what happened this morning, I could tell Milo that I loved him a million times, but the words would fall on deaf ears. Without tangible proof, the concept of love didn't materialize for Milo. Physical intimacy was the only thing he understood.

Shaking my head, I put my drink down. "I have to use the bathroom," I informed.

A dark shadow crossed Milo's face when I attempted to break contact by pulling my hand away. His fingers closed in to grip my hair instead. My face turned beet red when two wedding guests walked by and frowned at Milo's aggressive display of grabbing my hair. I nervously shifted from foot to foot.

"Milo?" I implored in a small voice to avoid making a further scene.

The aggression dissipated just as rapidly as it had accumulated. Milo's eyes widened before loosening the grip. "Don't take too long," he instructed.

I nodded to assert my recognition of his request. Turning away, I walked toward the 'Baños' sign, tuning out the alarm bells in my head. A dreaded voice whispered a warning; Milo's volatility will always drive a wedge between us.



Milo

My eyes followed Raven. My knuckles turned white from gripping the table's edge when she disappeared behind the double doors.

As soon as we walked in, heads turned to check out the girl in the emerald-green dress she wore to match my eyes. Half a dozen fuckers ogled her tanned legs and peach of an ass. They openly leered when they caught the drift of her slight cleavage.

Raven could kill a man with her looks but spent most of her life convincing herself otherwise. Her fashionable wardrobe was only a representation of

her career. Don't misconstrue a sense of style for sexuality. While that girl oozed sex, she had never owned it. A man could openly flirt with her, and she'd chalk it off to friendly gestures.

However, Raven's unawareness had no impact on my homicidal thoughts.

I craned my neck in search of her. An unbearable itch gnawed at my skin.

Fuck it.

Guzzling my drink, I slammed the glass with gusto and cut through the throngs of guests leading to the restroom. Storming over, I stood across the restroom until Raven finally opened the door to exit.

Raven's steps faltered when she noticed me. "Hey."

"Where have you been?" I asked gruffly.

Wringing her wrists, Raven nervously laughed. "I wasn't gone that long. Miss me already?" The beam on Raven's face disappeared when she took in my unamused nature. "At least, I didn't think I was gone for that long," she repeated faintly.

Raven searched for answers in every one of my expressions, wondering if separation anxiety caused this.

Meanwhile, I memorized every detail of her face until my unbearable paranoia morphed into that unbearable craving. I could hardly camouflage the lust emanating from my eyes.

This goddamned raven-haired vixen. The sexiest face and body on earth. My addiction of choice.

"It's fine. I just wanted to make sure you were okay," I mumbled, all of my apprehension forgotten and replaced by my libido.

Her eagle eyes continued their surveillance, implying to have some insight into my innermost thoughts. Before I could open my mouth, Raven fisted my shirt collar with her hand and tugged. Blindsided, I hypnotically watched Raven shuffle us inside the bathroom.

It was a fancy restroom with all the indications of a recent face-lift. There was a waiting room with overstuffed couches, a stone fountain in the middle, and lit-up scented candles. With one hand behind her back, Raven locked the door. She placed her hands on my shoulders and pushed down with blunt force.

Without argument, I stumbled backward to fall on a loveseat. When she reached for my belt, my agitation from earlier was utterly depleted. I could only focus on the dose she was about to hand out. My cock stirred, blood pounding.

I lazily trailed the length of Raven's body, drinking her in. I didn't bother hiding the lewd hunger in my eyes as she straddled my lap with her dress hiking up her thighs. My body was flush against hers, but I still gripped her bare thighs to drag her closer.

Wrapping a hand around her fragile neck, I pulled her face to mine, and my mouth collided against hers with some sort of manic need.

Raven reached inside my pants to whip out my cock, never breaking the heated lip lock. All other thoughts shut down when she wrapped a soft hand around the base.

My frantic hand reached underneath to hike Raven's dress up to her waist. The other hand roughly tugged her thong to the side with force, baring her little pussy. Raven matched my demonic need and placed my tip against herself. Grabbing her ass possessively, I brought her down my length.

"Holy fuck!" I groaned with my head thrown back as soon as I accessed her slick heat. Raven heeded my possessed plea and slammed down right as I thrust up.

"Fuck, Milo." She slanted her lips against mine, muffling our grunts. Her mouth was parted, hair falling over her shoulders as she rode me. My hands landed on her ass cheeks to spread them wide as I pounded into her.

I practically ripped her dress in my effort to pull it down so her tits could spill out. Gripping her breast, I lowered my mouth to suck her nipple. They were stiff and no doubt sensitive beyond belief.

“Milo!” she hissed. She trembled unbearably, writhing as if she’d burst any second. “Feels...so,” Raven croaked.

She stagnated when I sucked her nipple harder, biting in between and leaving a trail of markings in the wake. The small act made Raven nervous, but mindfulness for her comfort level was gone. Refusing to allow her apprehension to win, I rubbed my thumb on her clit until desperate gasps leaked out of her parted mouth, slowly gaining volume while she scraped her nails on my shoulders to rein in control.

“Holy fuck,” I shuddered as her wet cunt almost forced the come out of my cock. “You feel so fucking good,” I chewed out, pumping my hips. My balls drew up painfully. I needed to come, but not without her. She was dripping onto my cock; her arousal smudged over the exposed skin of my lower abdomen.

Raven rolled her hips with more purpose, her body ready for take-off. Her eyes were glazed over as savage convulsion rippled through her. I growled, pressing her down and impaling into her. She pushed me over the edge by sinking into me.

I erupted through every muscle of my body. My dick throbbed inside her before painting her walls with my come. I swallowed her moans and kept fucking her until my dick spasmed, my vision burnt bright, and Raven screamed incoherently.

We were loud. Too loud for an impromptu fuck at someone else’s wedding, and I didn’t give a shit. This bliss was too overpowering.

I blindly thrust my hips up a couple more times for good measure. Raven spasmed into my arms with her arms limply around my neck.

Wrenching my mouth off hers, I gasped for air, feeling drained and empty. My hands shook, refusing to calm down.

My world was spinning when Raven wiggled out of my hold to stand on quivering legs. I was fazed, dazed, and out of my mind. So, I watched as Raven fished for lipstick in her purse and applied a coat. My hand had an

absentminded hold on her thigh while she fixed her clothes and smoothed any wrinkles. Every so often, she bestowed me with a mischievous look.

After she was done, Raven leaned over to kiss me. “I see that you still need a minute,” she murmured. “I’ll go out first, so it doesn’t look suspicious. Don’t forget to wipe off the lipstick.”

Everything moved in slow motion. My intense high continued to block my ability to hear, process, and speak simultaneously. It took significant effort to tell her I gave no flying fucks about who caught us leaving this restroom together. Of course, I was only thinking the words in my mind. I didn’t say them out loud when a gust of cool air hit my senses. Suddenly alert, I did a double-take to find Raven speeding out of the bathroom.

“Rave! What the hell...” The swinging door slammed shut by the time I had formed a word.

Raven was far gone, taking my silence as approval. I stared for a full minute before laughing. Raven just fucked me in a bathroom and left me to do the walk of shame.



It took me longer than I cared to admit to gather my bearings. That girl turned me inside out.

I headed to the reception out back and spotted the flurry of black hair at the same high-top table. As if sensing my heated gaze, Raven peeked up through her lashes.

I had barely reached the table when a familiar loud voice boomed out, startling us both. “Rave! Milo!” Jaci marched in our direction with Brandon in tow.

Brandon and Jaci couldn’t make it here until today, but I texted them about Raven being my plus one at this wedding, so they weren’t surprised by our reunion.

“Hi, girl,” Raven chirped happily as Jaci took her into a hug. “How are you?”

“I am good. I missed you.” Jaci moved Raven from side to side.

“Hey, man,” Brandon greeted me with a curt fist bump before turning to Raven.

“And hello to you, good sir,” Jaci jested, taking me in a hug.

I watched Brandon and Raven swap a stiff greeting over Jaci’s shoulders.

It surprised me. Brandon wasn’t one to shy away from goading me on, and he knew of the only kryptonite that pressed my buttons. When he lived with us last year, he flirted with Raven to piss me off. Perhaps he was restraining himself because he didn’t want to start a fight at someone’s wedding.

Jaci let go of me to dive into a conversation. With my hand on Raven’s lower back, I pulled her close, drawing circles with my thumb. Jaci babbled meanwhile, telling us of her plans to snag a groomsman.

The planners soon announced the reception was about to start and guided guests to their respective tables. Raven and I sat at the same table as Brandon and Jaci, giving me a window into Raven and Brandon’s ongoing peculiar interaction.

Raven had been more rigid around all men to keep my jealousy at bay.

Good. I didn’t care about the reasons; I was just happy with the result.

However, if I read the situation correctly, there was an odd tension between Raven and Brandon, extending further than Raven’s consideration for my jealousy.

Jaci was the only one not to notice the tautness in the air, so she babbled on. She single-handedly carried the conversation as the night progressed.

Meanwhile, I continued to note the aversion Raven and Brandon exercised throughout dinner and attempted to dissect the subliminal message behind it. In my experience, this type of strain was similar to a lover’s quarrel,

though Brandon and Raven had never shared anything past a courteous friendship.

Still, I couldn't shake it away. Call it intuition.

I decided not to bring it up as we watched the newlyweds make their grand entrance. I didn't comment when dinner wrapped up or when the dance floor opened, either. Things were marginally calm between us. If history had taught me anything, I'd snap sooner or later. So for today, I only stewed over my observations and obliged when Raven dragged me to the dance floor, leaving the rest behind for another day.

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PART THREE

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FALL

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CHAPTER 6

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THE PAST
A YEAR WITHOUT YOU - FALL 2020



Reid

“STOP BEING MY YODA.”

“Yoda is hot.”

Raven threw her head back with a laugh. “Only if you are into green-looking monsters.”

I shrugged. “That chick in Avatar... Hot!”

“She was blue.”

Raven and I moved back to New York to break the news to the rest of the family. Upon our return to New York, Raven eradicated all traces of alcohol from the house. Milo still sent alcoholic anonymous packages containing information for addicts. However, he addressed them to Raven so as not to incite my fury.

Similarly, Milo sent packages addressed to me to help with Raven’s issues. He researched art therapy, perfect for creative individuals like Raven, who found their center through drawing, dancing, and exercising.

After thinking about it, I called my friend Sam, a personal trainer. He had been coming over for private dance and workout classes. I forced Raven to participate, chalking it up to moral support.

“Stop procrastinating and punch the bag,” I said. Raven put on her boxing gloves, dilly-dallying by playing with the dog.

Raven had barely hit the bag, but sweat was already dripping from her forehead. “What exactly is the point of me learning this?” Raven panted.

“The point is for us to learn this together. Now, get punching.”

“Why don’t you move your pretty face a little closer, and I can punch you right in the fucking nose?”

I pouted at her. “You’d punch a dying man?”

“You already used that joke today.”

“Did I?” I furrowed my brow. “My bad. Back to punching.”

Raven looked down at her hands. “My hand hurts.” She had done absolutely nothing.

“Raven Riley Beckett, punch the fucking bag, or so help me, God!”

Raven made no attempt and stared at the bag like it was her mortal enemy.

“Who wants lemonade and the last donut?” Mia entered with a pitcher and a donut.

“Me.” Raven’s hand shot up in the air at the same time I also said, “Me.”

Raven and I looked at each other. “Dead man gets the donut,” I pointed out simply.

“You already used that joke today,” Mia and Raven shouted in unison.

Other than the minor glitch of my possible impending death, the last few months had been okay. We peeled back the layers of what landed Raven in a depressive, manic state. While I didn’t believe in therapy, I encouraged Raven to explore alternate options customized to her personality and past,

using a friend of mine as a guide. He had enlisted in the military but was discharged early. The few years in service left him with triggers, causing him to relive his traumatic memories. Later, he adopted a dog as an emotional support animal. The companionship grounded him and eased his anxiety.

It was the textbook answer for Raven, the caretaker.

A tiny furball whined by my leg for a treat. Reaching down, I pet Mr. Whiskers while Raven took off her boxing gloves.

This French Bulldog was a rescue from a local animal shelter and my belated birthday gift to Raven. When I found him, I knew he'd be perfect for Raven.

Unfortunately, she named him Mr. Whiskers as if he hadn't suffered enough.

Unbeknownst to Raven, Mr. Whiskers was her unofficial emotional support animal. He was already soothing Raven's anxiety, but this theory could only be tested once Raven faced Milo again.

Full Circle



Raven

Reid and I moved back to New York to break the bad news to our family. The whole family, sans Milo.

Milo sent me one email before leaving New York behind. The email was concise; he loved me, but our lives were better without him.

Milo called me often, keeping our conversations succinct. He generally ended the calls with a warning against mentioning the communication to our family. When I asked Milo for an explanation, he mentioned not wanting to upset Reid while he was sick.

I knew Milo well enough to recognize there was more to it.

There was simply no harmony in the sequence of events. Milo and I partook in a challenging heart-to-heart before I left for Baltimore to calm Reid down. Milo vanished while I was gone, though we'd decided to continue the dialogue over our budding romance.

A pestering voice often orbited around an allegation that Milo put his hands on Mia. I prodded Mia for an answer, but she assured me it was a baseless accusation.

So, a piece of the puzzle was still missing. And all three Sinclairs were tight-lipped about their three-way quarrel.

Another voice in my head nagged that Milo was using this as a pretext. Perhaps how I behaved was too daunting for Milo, and he wanted an indefinite sabbatical from me.

It was frustrating. If Milo couldn't carry the weight of the words about loving me, he shouldn't have said them to me. I never declared my feelings for Milo until I experienced a soul-crushing, consuming type of true love for him. I wished he had forwarded me the same respect.

Hence, my understanding and my sanity and maturity waned with each passing month, indicating Milo's return was nowhere on the horizon. Our phone conversations only fueled my anger.

A few weeks ago, in a bout of anger, I bought some paint cans and painted Milo's old bedroom pink.

Another time, I took all of Milo's designer clothes and gave them to the homeless. One homeless gentleman in our neighborhood, known as Victor, was infamous for jerking off at the corner of 86th and Amsterdam. I saved Milo's favorite items of clothing for him. I smiled every time I passed Victor and noted the smeared cum on Milo's Armani pants.

Later, I felt terrible for using Victor in my quest for revenge, so I dropped off soup for him. In turn, Victor always asked if I'd like to take photos wearing more of my ex's clothes so we could stick it to him.

Between my failed relationship and Reid's deteriorating health, my insides remained crumpled like a tangled mess. But I was careful to ensure my smile was bright during the day, especially while dealing with Reid, our family, and work. For which I was currently late.

In a frenzy, I rummaged through my closet for my black sweater. Alexa and I were meeting to sign a lease for our business, so I was in a rush. After combing through my closet for my sweater, I charged to Mia's room.

"Mia, did you borrow my sweater—" I burst open Mia's bedroom door and... froze. So did Mia and Brandon, who were entwined together against the wall. Mia quickly shoved him off.

"Rave!" Mia exclaimed in surprise. "I thought you were at work."

"Raven," Brandon said quietly, "we didn't mean for you to find out like this."

We?!

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" I immediately ran up to Brandon and screamed in his face. "She is just a child, and you are a grown-ass man. Have you lost your damn mind?"

"Rave—" Mia called out, but Brandon put his hand up to silence her.

"What the hell is going on? Someone better start talking right fucking now."

"Mia and I are together," Brandon answered.

"Like hell you are."

"It's true."

"No, it's not," I countered.

Shortly after Milo left, Jaci and Alexa moved out. Brandon told us his apartment was being renovated, so he stayed behind in the split-level apartment. However, it was clear his intentions were far from honorable.

A silent communication ensued between Brandon and Mia. Milo and I used to swap similar looks while sneaking around. That connection didn't develop overnight. When Mia opened her mouth again, I raised my hand to shush her. Attacking Brandon was futile. The details of this scene might be ambiguous, but they were clearly in on it together.

Composing myself, I twisted my body entirely to face Mia. "Sit," I said authoritatively.

Mia plopped down in her vanity chair.

"How long?" I demanded.

Mia held my gaze. "A little while," she whispered guiltily.

I turned to Brandon next. "Have you two been physical?"

"Excuse me!" Brandon's brew almost hit his hairline.

"Did I stutter?"

The question was answered in the form of Mia vehemently shaking her head at Brandon from my peripheral vision. "Yes," he replied, nonetheless.

I took a sharp inhale. "Brandon, we have known your family for a long time. Out of respect, I'm not going to take any actions right this second, but as of now, whatever's been going on between you two, it's over," I said stoically.

"Rave, please." Mia shot to her feet and circled me. She stood between Brandon and me, shielding his massive body with her more petite frame. "We are not doing anything illegal. The legal age of consent is seventeen."

"I don't care about the age of consent. No statement about your 'boyfriend' should start with citing the legal age of consent."

"Mia, pack your things," Brandon said with an eerie calm. "We are leaving."

Fire was about to come out of my nostrils. "Brandon, you have exactly one hour to pack your shit and get the fuck out of our home." I paused before

adding to clarify, “And you are leaving alone.”

“Rave, listen to me—”

“I’m not going anywhere without Mia,” Brandon cut her off, speaking directly to me without bothering to acknowledge her. This was exactly the problem with dating someone older and in a different position in life. There was no power distribution or equality in say. He was making all the decisions for her, and Mia was abiding by them. This was a nightmare. Everything we were supposed to protect Mia from had manifested in the form of Brandon.

“Then you will be sadly disappointed when you walk out of here alone. Mia isn’t going anywhere with you.”

“Mia’s not okay in this house, nor does she belong here. I’m not leaving her someplace where her well-being is jeopardized.”

“Who the fuck are you to tell me where she belongs? I look after her well-being. She is seventeen and belongs with her family. I’m not going to repeat myself, Brandon. Get the fuck out of my house and stay the fuck away from my sister!”

“This is not your fucking house!” Brandon yelled back. “And she is not your sister.”

A slap smacked across Brandon’s face, but it wasn’t my palm that connected with his cheek.

It was Mia’s.

“Apologize,” was the only word Mia said to Brandon while he stared in disbelief. “Apologize to Raven. And don’t ever speak to her that way again.”

Brandon’s bewildered expression only intensified. We appeared equally flabbergasted by Mia’s actions, making me wonder if I gave her too little credit for standing her ground.

Mia fathomed Brandon's lack of enthusiasm over retracting his words and broke the silence. "Brandon, I need to speak to Raven alone."

"Fine," he muttered before storming toward the bedroom door. "I am moving out," he threw over his shoulder, waiting momentarily with a supposed expectation for Mia to follow him out. Mia stayed rooted in place, further increasing my pride in her stance.

Ultimately, Brandon slammed the door behind him, retreating down the stairs. Mia walked to the bed with serene composure and sat at the edge.

"Mia," I approached her cautiously. "Please tell me this is some sort of joke."

What could have possibly driven Mia to do this?

"Rave, please," Mia said shakily. "He's the only man I have been truly interested in." Mia quickly stole a glance as I openly gaped at her confession.

This was my fault. I knew Mia had a crush on Brandon but assumed it was harmless. Consensual or not, a teenager knew nothing about a relationship with a grown man.

Mia was repeating all my mistakes, throwing her future away in the aftermath.

We have come full circle.

"Mia," I started slowly, "You know as well as I do that Brandon's not a good choice. He's ten years older than you and your brother's business partner. He shouldn't be pursuing you."

"But he didn't pursue me. I swear, it just happened. I was upset about Milo ____"

"So, that's what this is about," I pronounced. Mia was upset because of Milo and was transferring it to an older man giving her attention. This was her unsuccessful attempt at replacing Milo. "You were feeling vulnerable

after your fight with Milo, and Brandon took advantage of the situation,” I reasserted my theory.

Mia angrily jumped to her feet. “Of course not! I get that you are upset, but deep down, you know that Brandon is a good guy.”

“If he is such a good guy, why is he chasing a teenager?” I snapped.

“The same thing could be said about Milo,” Mia fired back. Her face softened immediately, looking guilty over the outburst. “Rave, I’m sorry. I know this is difficult, but please believe me when I tell you he’s not taking advantage of me. Brandon loves me. He told me so himself.”

Oh, God.

Closing my eyes, I breathed through it. “Mia, men sometimes say things they think you want to hear. And dating a twenty-seven-year-old man is entirely different than what Milo and I had.”

“Oh, so you guys get a pass? You can make your fair share of mistakes while I’m not even allowed to explore what I want?” Mia pointed her hand toward her chest, anger rising with the flush of her face. “This is exactly what Brandon was talking about. You and Milo act like you know what’s best for me, but you don’t.”

I stood to put an arm around Mia. “Okay, so, talk to me. Tell me, what’s best for you?”

“What do you want me to say?” Mia’s voice choked. “Your definition of a good life doesn’t jive with mine.”

“W-What do you mean?”

“I mean you and Milo have been high-strung for years, convinced I’m some sort of genius in the making. Milo made me skip a grade and signed me up for an advanced curriculum, but he didn’t ask me what I wanted. My only path is the one etched by him. If I veer off course, you step in and list logical reasons to placate me. Milo acts like my gilded cage, with you as the gatekeeper to coax me with sweet words until I willingly stay locked up. Brandon’s the first person to understand that my likes and dislikes differ. He

accepts me for who I am. I love all three of you, but I don't fit in with you. I've never had expensive tastes like you guys. I smoke pot. I want to dye my hair blue—"

"Mia, I'm sorry. We'll ease up on you. None of us give you grief for smoking pot anyway. And if you want to dye your hair, that's fine—"

"—And I'd much rather work as a makeup artist instead of attending Yale."

My lightheaded dizziness almost made me stumble backward.

"I was offered a full-time job as a makeup artist for a newscast. It starts next year. I want to take the job and do beauty school on the side. I don't want to go to college, but all three of you have such a strong stance against it. Even Reid would throw a fit if I took a different route."

If this were anyone else, there'd be nothing wrong with an alternate route. However, Mia was a semi-genius according to her IQ tests. It was as if Galileo announced he'd never look through a telescope again.

When Mia was younger, she'd frequently throw temper tantrums. The only person to constantly keep her level was Milo. I never realized Milo did so by simply redirecting her attention to productive activities.

"Mia, you have to go to Yale," I announced with conviction. Mia worked years toward her acceptance at Yale.

"Rave, I am not going—"

"Mia, just listen to me for a second—"

"No!" Mia exclaimed. "Brandon said the four of us have an unhealthy attachment to each other, and we meddle way more than normal. We don't have any boundaries, and he's right. This decision belongs only to me."

I gritted my teeth, fists clenched at the side of my body. If there were ever a person I hated, it'd be Brandon. I hated him. I had half a mind to let Mia move in with Brandon. She'd be bored with the makeup job and living with Brandon within the year.

Unfortunately, I didn't have the time for Mia to figure this out for herself. Mia's college started shortly, and her tuition had been paid in full, courtesy of Milo.

"Rave," Mia's voice gentled. "It's not just you. I am guilty of doing the same things. I shouldn't have meddled in whatever happened between you and Milo. I don't understand your relationship, but it's clear relationships are complicated looking from the outside. I never understood until experiencing it for myself. I'm sorry."

My eyes shot up to hers, my whole body jerking intuitively. Milo and I were the culprits for setting such a terrible example for Mia.

"No, Mia. You were right to interfere," I said decisively. "Our circle is tight-knit. If Milo and I hadn't broken things off back then, a scandal like ours would have left our reputation in shreds. Just like it would for you and Brandon."

"But you love him."

My stance remained self-assured. The next words I was about to utter were untrue, but I was ready to say whatever it took. "Milo and I were a mistake. Because we started our relationship preemptively, it caused issues that could never be salvaged. We are stuck in a bad cycle. Please, Mia, don't follow in my footsteps."

"But it's not like that with Brandon. You have no idea how much he has been there for me since my fight with Milo and everything else going on with Reid."

My shoulders slumped, and I sat back down on the bed. Rocking back and forth on the bed, a decision came to me.

"Babe, I am so sorry we have been so hard on you," I confessed with sincerity. "But this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Look, I'll meet you halfway. Do your college courses online and do your job on the side. If later in life you decide against being a makeup artist, you'll always have the degree to fall back on."

Mia's tone went up an octave. "Beauty school is feasible with a full-time job, but not Yale. Do you know how difficult those courses are?"

"Then do Yale part-time only and go to beauty school on the side. Another job is bound to come around by the time you finish—"

"No, it won't, Rave. This is a dream job. An opportunity like this—"

"Will be plenty available once you graduate," I finished the sentence and watched Mia carefully, who was finally listening to me. Mia silently contemplated my offer, so I proceeded with my closing argument. "You said Reid will freak out if he finds out you aren't going to Yale. Do you really want to stress Reid out right now?"

I was a terrible human being for using Reid's affliction, but my guilt receded when the misfortune saved at least one person in this household. Mia conceded.

"You'll let me do both?"

"I'll pay the tuition for your beauty school myself."

Mia sighed heavily and sat next to me on the bed. "Okay. I'll do both."

"Thank you." I grabbed her hand to squeeze it appreciatively.

One issue down. One more to go.

"And Mia, you have to end things with Brandon."

After her fallout with Milo, not a soul was around for Mia. If I forcefully rid Brandon from her life now, Mia would only rebel and never forgive me. So, this had to be her decision.

Mia opened her mouth to argue, but I swiftly continued. "Mia, I'm sure Brandon cares for you, but do you want to wager his entire life just to explore those feelings? If you're caught, it'll be solely on him. We know so many people who will persecute him for chasing a younger girl. Plus, you know your brother. Brandon's family is rich, but Milo is better connected. He can ruin anyone's life in the snap of a finger, and he will ruin Brandon for this."

Mia grimaced. She was sharp, alert, and gave me her full attention.

“Maybe Milo will understand—”

“Do you remember what Milo did to Asher?” I cut her off.

“Milo kicked him out of their company.”

“And where’s Asher now?”

Mia’s eyes were downcast as she mumbled, “I don’t know.”

“Exactly my point.”

Mia’s shoulders slacked in response, looking defeated.

I might lack the details of their fight, but I knew Mia was doing this to get a rise out of Milo. She just didn’t consider the long-term effect it would have on Brandon.

Once the novelty of sex wore off, Mia would realize the same truth I had to learn—Brandon could never heal the heartbreak left behind by Milo. By that point, they both would have lost way too much.

“Milo will kick Brandon out of their company, dissolve their partnership, ruin his name. If you care for Brandon, then the best thing you can do is let him go,” I asserted.

“How can you say that when you’ve been moping around for months over Milo? Can you ever let him go?”

When her eyes flipped to mine, I disclosed the decision I had already made—Lead by example.

Taking Mia’s hand, I stroked it in a consoling manner. “What if we both let them go and reflect on our feelings after some time? If you still feel the same, you’ll know it’s real.”

Mia nodded slowly as a lone tear fell down her cheek. “I am sorry,” Mia murmured. “I’m so sorry I disappointed you.”

I pulled her into a hug. “Never. I’m so proud of you for making such a mature decision.”

Now that Milo was entirely out of our lives, I was the only one here to pick up the pieces. As the understanding settled in about what needed to happen, I squeezed Mia tighter. We stayed huddled together, neither ready to let go of the other. Part of me was reborn at that moment with only one mission in mind—to fix everything, no matter the cost.



“Hi, honey.” Dad waved as he walked into my study for our family meeting, followed closely by my mom.

“Hey, Dad. Where are Uncle Reese and Tessa?”

“Present,” Uncle Reese raised his hand.

“I called a family meeting to discuss a new financial development. I looked over the budget sheets I had made, and the news isn’t great. So, we have to make some changes.”

“What kind of changes?”

Despite ‘emancipating’ himself at the age of twenty-five, a responsible Milo arranged to pay for six months of living expenses, after which he was cutting the family off. This family would still be okay financially if our parents got jobs. Otherwise, we wouldn’t continue enjoying luxuries such as food, water, and shelter.

“Mom, you are going to start working for me.”

“W-What?” Theressa asked in disbelief. “B-But with everything going on...”

“Alexa and I signed a lease for a new space. We’ll be moving there on Monday. I was planning to hire seamstresses, but you can help me sew instead.”

A shared silence was exchanged between the parents, but I didn't care.

"Tessa, I want to see you there on Monday alongside Mom."

"Me?" Tessa asked in shock.

There was one thing I had come to understand about depression. It spread from loneliness and a lack of purpose. Medication and therapy never worked for me but having Reid back in my life did. Perhaps if Tessa worked at a place surrounded by positivity and her best friend, Theresa, it'd be a step in the right direction. It was better than being cooped up in that room.

"Yes, you. I'll train you on how to run the shop, take online orders and ship the outfits."

Tessa didn't argue.

"Since Mia is going off to college, nothing is stopping you from going back to work full-time. What do you think, Uncle Reese?"

I felt terrible for calling Uncle Reese out, the only working adult in the household, but asking him to work full-time was a fair request. Normal adults like myself had full-time jobs.

"Can you speak to your clinic on Monday to turn your position back to full-time?"

"Of-of course, dear."

"Thank you." I turned to my father to close the loop. "Dad, I'm going to help you reinstate your medical license. We can go over it tomorrow."

Not a single argument from my father.

Milo accommodated all of them when they refused. Unfortunately for our parents, I wasn't Milo. Both sets of parents looked at me like I had grown three heads. Too bad!

Reid, my sick best friend, and Mia, my underaged sister, were the only ones to get a pass. Reid and Mia might drown if I tried to take care of anyone

else.

“Well, thank you for coming by to discuss this. If you will excuse me now, I have some work to do.”

They wordlessly stood to make their exit, looking unsure about the hand they got dealt.



I stumbled into bed after an exhausting day. My lull was interrupted by a high pitch ringing. My heart stopped beating when I looked at my phone and fumbled with it to answer the call.

“Hello.”

“Rave,” Milo’s deep voice hit my earbuds.

For the first time since Milo left, I was suddenly glad he had moved away from the insanity of this family.

Individually, they were all tolerable. Together, they were enough to drive any sane person out of their mind.

I wasn’t angry with Milo anymore for leaving. Instead, I hoped he found the peace he was looking for in his new life.

“Are you there?”

Knowing what was to come at the end of this conversation, I led with the one thing I could currently tolerate, humor. “Who is this?”

A deep sigh. “How are you?”

“Janeen? When did your voice get so deep?”

“I’m offended,” he replied dryly.

“Dave?”

Silence on the other end. “Who is Dave?” he finally asked tightly.

“Seriously?”

“Janeen is a friend of yours,” he continued. “She is a real person. You are too lazy to make up fake names. So, who is Dave?”

“Our new handyman.”

Milo didn’t respond. Then he said, “I miss you.”

Picking at an imaginary thread on my bed, I said, “I miss you, too.”

We generally started these calls by admitting we loved and missed one another. However, the calls quickly escalated from heated phone sex to a lover’s quarrel.

Tonight was no different. “Do you think about the last time we were together?”

All the fucking time. “Yes,” I whispered. No matter how much I shut it down, the memories of the best night of my life popped back up.

“You said no one else touched you the way I did,” he narrated, his tone turning gravelly and sexy.

My heart palpitations took over. My breathing picked up. Us on that dingy couch at my old brownstone, surrounded by broken glass and knocked-over chairs.

“Do you remember my tongue on your clit when I bent you over the couch,” he demanded, his voice trembling slightly.

“Milo...”

“Fuck, Rave,” Milo continued. “I wish I could taste you right now. I’d drag my tongue down your stomach, then suck on that sweet clit. Take your underwear off.”

With one quick yank, I pulled down my shorts, taking my underwear with it.

“Move your hand down.”

I put the phone on speaker to comply. I could shut my brain off while Milo took the reins.

“Push two fingers into that tight cunt of yours.”

I did it without hesitation. “Fuck,” a gasp fell out of my mouth.

“I am fisting my dick, wishing it were your small hand wrapped around it instead. My cock’s hurting for you, baby. I love how you used to suck me off. Your tongue... fuck. Does it turn you on to know I’m pumping my cock right now while looking at a photo of you?”

“Yes. Fuck, yes. Oh, God.”

“Slip another finger inside that tight pussy of yours.”

I did as he asked.

“I wish it were me stretching you out instead of your fingers. Are you pretending it’s my dick that’s fucking you instead of your fingers?”

“Yes.”

“You’re going to come right as I do. Curl your fingers inside your pussy and use your thumb to circle your clit.”

I kept up. My breathing was too heavy at this point, and I felt lightheaded. I was panting, aching for a release, yet unable to let go until Milo did.

“If I were there, I’d lick that sweet pussy of yours until you scream. I’d make you squirt on my tongue and lick every drop.”

“I’m going to come,” I cried out before biting my bottom lip to muffle my voice.

“Fuck, baby, I’m coming.”

I panted heavily over the phone alongside him. When our breathlessness diminished, we were both silent.

These phone calls had persevered similarly over the last few months. We expressed concern over Reid, reasserted we wanted to be with one another,

leading to my demands about his impromptu move and Milo's reference to some polaroid photos of me. Apparently, I was ghastly around Milo, and around Reid, I was a vision of perfection.

Subsequently, Milo's sympathy for Reid would transform into jealousy.

That was the juncture where I'd get pissed off since Milo could be with me if he so pleased, and Milo would be unable to provide me with a proper explanation. Adamant he fucked up beyond repair, Milo digressed about how he shouldn't have called.

Within two days, Milo would end up calling me again.

On and on, the cycle continued.

"I texted Reid again," he finally spoke. "He's still refusing my offer."

"He's a stubborn asshole."

Milo and I researched something called a living donor. I offered to give Reid a portion of my liver, as the liver was one of the only organs with the capacity to regenerate. A living donor increased the chances of a successful transplant if we were compatible.

However, Reid turned down my offer though there were no implications or life-threatening risks to the living donor. The risk lay with the person receiving a portion of the organ, which was Reid. Ultimately, it didn't matter as I wasn't a suitable candidate.

The most compatible donor was a blood relative of the same sex who practiced healthy living habits. With the remaining family members ruled out due to age and compatibility, the best candidate for Reid's chances of survival fell on Milo.

However, Reid also turned down Milo's multiple offers to help.

"How's Mia?" Milo asked after I disclosed some of today's proceedings.

"A little lost. I think we are too hard on her."

"Not at all. She's almost an adult—"

“I’m starting to realize being an adult for us four might not mean the same as most other people,” I cut Milo off. “You must admit we were all late to the game.”

“How so?”

With a deep sigh, I revealed, “Reid started drinking early but was out of control only after turning eighteen. It’s not enough to be an adult; you must be an adult who exercises good judgment. Mia’s almost an adult, but at the first sign of a failed relationship between you two, she started dating someone who is no good for her.”

This wasn’t Milo’s fault. We were simply unsupervised children who had access to money and alcohol. To be honest, I was shocked more of us didn’t turn into addicts.

“Who is Mia dating?” Milo demanded, ignoring all of my other revelations.

“No one important. I did the same thing at Mia’s age...” I trailed off at the reminder of the sore subject. “I just meant, it’s not her fault. No one set good examples for Mia.”

Milo picked up on my reference. “Things could have been different between us if we started later in life,” he admitted.

“Yes,” I replied without hesitation. “We both made many mistakes, and things can never be any different if we continue those same patterns.”

“What are you saying?” Milo asked, slight panic lacing his tone.

“I’m just wondering how we can lead anyone by example if we’re repeating mistakes from our past. We’re lying to our families about our communication. I don’t understand why you left, but I get it if you need time to sort yourself out. Until you do, perhaps the best thing we can do is to let each other go.”

“So, things can be different for Mia?”

“So, things can be different for all of us.”

Milo was quiet before slowly admitting he couldn't help his jealousy, and I admitted that I couldn't stop my subsequent reactions. Ultimately, we acknowledged these calls were only making matters worse. I burst out crying while Milo patiently listened. Finding myself unable to end the call that might be our last, I held onto the phone for dear life. Soft assurances were made there was no one else for either of us, but it couldn't go on like this.

"Good night, Rave," he whispered when there was nothing else left to say. "I love you."

The phone hung loosely in my hand, the dial tone audible in my otherwise quiet room. I knew Milo wasn't saying good night; he was saying goodbye.

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HOPE

Raven,

The last few months have been unbearable. But despite my difficulty in maintaining distance from you, I couldn't stand to be the cause of your demise. Watching you get destroyed was the only thing worse than losing you, and I watched it for weeks. I was worried it was about to result in your utter annihilation.

Why were you hurting yourself around me, Raven?

And why are you now suddenly okay around Reid?

I can only hope for this distance to give us both clarity, though I remain a non-believer. As the matter stands, our volatile relationship has less to do with Reid or Mia and more with us. It's an actual part of our dynamics. We will always have the potential to get out of hand, just as we did in the past.

If these letters are meant to be my most honest confessions, I have to admit as much. Regardless of my best intentions and the time I'm taking to work on myself, I don't know if I can change. I thrive on your retaliations because they are the small confirmations of your love.

Reid, Mia, and I used to tease you for being unreactive, but we failed to consider our hot tempers shaped your non-reactive nature. Our whims never left you with enough space to lose your shit. Maybe that's why I subconsciously push your buttons. Every spurt of violence and reaction indicates you share my fierce instability. As humans, we hate being alone. Unfortunately, I'm only human, and I don't want to be alone in this manic need for you. I need you to experience the same insanity I feel at every threat of losing you.

It's sick, I know. I wish it didn't have to be this way, but I don't want to lie in a letter I'll never send. Eventually, this prison sentence will end. I'll find my way back to you, but this insatiable need for you will still rule my every instinct. I'll go back to being the madman I am when around you, and it'll be up to you to somehow pull me back.

Please pull me back instead of giving up because a relationship like ours will always be a work in progress. But I'd rather have an imperfect relationship with you forever than a perfect one with anyone else.

I love you.

-Milo

CHAPTER 7

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THE PRESENT
A YEAR WITH YOU - FALL 2021



Raven

THE FLAT SCREEN IN THE VILLA WAS BROKEN.

More specifically, Milo smashed the flat-screen television in the villa's living room by throwing a vase. Remnants of shattered glass were scattered on the floor. I was huddled in one corner of the room, my arms protectively hugging Mr. Whiskers. My poor dog was shaking uncontrollably. He was a rescue and was easily jarred by loud noises. I held him closer to my chest, hoping to drown out the fear-inducing noises.

After a few months of bliss, some of our repressed issues hit us like a tornado.

Milo viewed our family members as the biggest threat to losing me. Besides Mia, I had limited my contact with our family back home.

However, a parcel was dropped off earlier to diminish my little progress in convincing Milo to let them back into his life.

Since Alexa's wedding, Milo and I hadn't left this villa. We spent our mornings between breakfast and work, afternoons at the gym and lying on the beach, and evenings between the sheets.

While I adored this bubble, we needed normalcy. A guy like Milo, keen on being active, could only turn unpredictable when caged. The glitch was—no one was caging Milo but himself.

So, after days of playing recluse, I insisted on a night out in town.

Milo caved, agreeing to leave after his meeting with Brandon and Jaci. Since we extended our stay in Mexico, and Alexa was also around due to her new hubby, Brandon and Jaci now made occasional trips to Tulum.

Brandon used to be one of my favorite people, but not anymore. To avoid him, I stayed in our bedroom when they came over for the meeting. However, Milo was determined I socialize.

“Baby, you are the one who wanted to see people. Why are you hiding in the bedroom?”

“I’m not hiding. I’m getting dressed,” I responded, shimmying myself into the outfit Milo had insisted on for our night out—a white knee-length lacey sheath dress. “I want to look good for you, and I don’t want to interrupt your business meeting.” I blew him a kiss, only to be met with half a smile and a pair of unconvinced eyes.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Raven. Come outside.”

Milo was an anomaly at times. The last I checked, he couldn’t stand it when Brandon breathed the same air as me.

“Fine,” I sighed. “Be there in a minute.”

I joined them in the living room, awkwardly skirting around Brandon. When their meeting concluded, Jaci shot up to her feet. “Rave, I completely forgot. I have something for you.”

“What?” I asked, but she was already out the door, letting it shut behind her.

Soon after, Alexa left as well. It only made my uncomfortableness more apparent. I awkwardly conversed with Brandon under Milo’s watchful eyes. Luckily, Brandon finally stood from his chair, indicating his departure.

“I should head back to pack. It’s a two-hour drive to the airport, and my flight’s at—”

“Okay. Good seeing you. Bye,” I responded too quickly.

Milo looked back and forth. “Someone is excited you’re leaving. What did you do to piss off my girlfriend?”

“You’d have to ask her yourself,” Brandon mumbled.

Before Brandon could move, Milo had his comeback. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m sure Brandon didn’t mean anything,” I hurriedly barged in to nip it in the bud. “Sorry, Brandon,” I mumbled under my breath, irritated that on top of everything, he was now a hindrance to my relationship. “I’m just excited for a night out with my man.” I glanced at Milo, smiling warmly.

Brandon barely acknowledged me, already sauntering to the door. “Bye,” he threw over his shoulders as an afterthought, disdain in his voice.

“What was that about?” Milo asked instantaneously.

“I was going to ask you the same.”

“You’ve been skittish around Brandon.”

Surprised at Milo’s intuitiveness, I paused to find the right words. “I wasn’t trying to be. I just know you get weird when I talk to other men.”

Milo contemplated my answer, assessing the believability of my words under his intense scrutiny, which cracked the best of them.

I held my steady stare until Milo declared, “Okay. I’m going to go change.”

He wanted to prod further, so I was grateful when he dropped it. The fallout with Brandon wasn’t mine to divulge. It was Mia’s.

Milo walked into the living room in a black t-shirt and white shorts when a banging ensued on our front door.

“Open up,” Jaci yelled from the other side.

“Coming.” Milo lazily meandered to the door, undoubtedly attempting to piss off an impatient Jaci.

“What’s taking so long?” Jaci banged on the door again.

“I’m all the way on the other side of the house,” Milo said from mere feet away. “I’m moving as fast as I can.” His strut only slowed, making me giggle. I loved goofy Milo, who pranked people.

When Milo opened the door, Jaci practically shoved him aside to enter. “Finally.”

“Hello to you, too.”

I primed to greet Jaci, who carried a generic brown shipping box and plopped it onto the floor. When I left New York, I left behind one of Mr. Whiskers’ boxes by accident. I asked Mia to give the box to Jaci the next time she flew out. I had packed the box so long ago that I had forgotten its contents.

“Here you go,” she happily chirped, ignorant about the trail of destruction she was about to leave behind. “Mia gave me this box and said it was for you. Can’t believe I almost forgot.”

“Thanks, girl.”

“Alright. I have to pack.” Jaci took me in a swift hug. “Great catching up with both of you.”

“Bye.”

The door had hardly shut close when Milo set the box on the table so we could go through the contents. However, when Milo found photos of the dog, Reid, and me—all taken shortly after Mr. Whiskers’ adoption—I wisely stepped away.

The pictures were meant to be a satirical twist on a modern family. Taken out of context, they looked like precious holiday card photos—A happy couple and their dog.

Through my peripheral, I watched Milo's rigid posture and the emanating rage. Closing my eyes, I remained tranquil. Reid was still a sore topic, but a small part of me trusted things not to spiral due to some silly photos.

All the frames were promptly thrown against the wall, jarring me with the loud noise.

I had discounted his triggers in the shuffle of ensuring my reactions didn't chase Milo away. Long ago, I had associated his reactive volatility with being triggered by the threat of losing me.

When Milo took out Mr. Whiskers' adoption papers next, my instincts screamed. With the documents in hand, Milo walked over to pour himself a glass of whiskey. A dreaded question followed his wrath.

"Was that dog a gift from Reid?" he inquired tersely.

I didn't have to respond.

I watched with petrified horror as Milo took the vase off the table and threw it at the television. I hastily scooped Mr. Whiskers up and nestled with him in one corner.

That's where we had stood for the last ten minutes.

Milo's silence was the most considerable quandary in finding a solution to our problems. Was the reminder about my bond with Reid pissing Milo off, or was this about the photos, or was it a combination of both?

Mr. Whiskers whimpered again when Milo picked up the bust-sized crystal figurine in the hallway and smashed it against the wall.

"Milo, please," I whispered almost inaudibly, "You are scaring the dog, not just me. Let's throw away the box if it's bothering you," I suggested cautiously.

Milo turned to Mr. Whiskers, staring him down like he was the devil. I suddenly realized why Milo was taking out his anger.

Milo wanted me to get rid of my dog.

He viewed my regard for the dog as a reflection of my fondness for Reid. If I let it stew, Milo might convince himself there was truth behind the notion. There was only one action Milo associated with love and comfort.

When Milo punched the wall, and I saw blood oozing on his knuckles, I ran to Mr. Whiskers' crate, shoved my dog inside, and closed it. Taking five careful steps toward Milo, I threw myself at him, hugging him from behind.

Milo momentarily froze in place.

"Shh," I soothed. "Please, Milo. You have to stop. You're bleeding."

Rubbing both hands up and down his sides, I struggled to soothe the uncertainty he had carried throughout our relationship.

"I love you so much," I told him, covering the back of his neck with gentle kisses.

When his stance remained aggressive, I circled a hand around his waist, smoothing my way down to his groin and caressing him over his clothes. I cautiously kissed more of the exposed skin and ducked under his arm to face him.

Milo watched me suspiciously. Ignoring the distrustful eyes, I pressed kisses on his collarbone, the base of his neck, his jaw. When our bodies were flush against one another, I reached between us, unbuttoning his white shorts to pull out his hard length.

A groan resonated from deep within his chest, his lids slightly drooping to take in the length of my body.

"What are you doing, Rave?" he demanded, struggling between his desire for havoc and his desire for me.

My dress was form-fitting and off-the-shoulder, exposing a portion of my neckline and décolleté. Tugging until Milo grew harder in my hold, I used my other hand to grab the fabric of my dress and removed it off my shoulder, pulling it down until my chest was exposed.

I grabbed Milo's bruised hand and placed it on my breast, forcing his hand to close around it. Ignoring the smudged blood painting my breast red, I took a few steps backward until my spine hit the wall he punched. Milo followed me, transfixed on me as if I was his salvation.

I muted my croak when he flexed his fingers, crushing my mound with his grasp. I was unable to do it again when rapidly and without warning, Milo grabbed both of my wrists and slammed them against the wall.

Nonetheless, I remained docile, a pliable body to redirect his wrath. Milo slanted his face to bite my breast. My echoes increased with his ferocity in sucking my nipple. "Godddd," I pleaded when he swirled his tongue. "Milo —"

My words were cut off when he spun me around, my palms landing flat on the drywall. Milo attempted to peel my dress up, but it stuck to my skin from the humidity. He barely got the fabric over the hump of my ass, leaving it bunched.

Milo tugged my panties and grunted, rubbing my ass with an approving pat. His low growl of appreciation was the only sign that Milo's rationality was returning.

"Ah," I moaned when two cold fingers nudged my sex, probing aggressively for entry. My pussy spasmed, and I had hardly felt a trickle of wetness when Milo buried himself inside me with absolute force and a tight grip on my neck.

"Fuck," he chewed out as if suppressing some sort of deeper agony. "God, I love your body."

Milo ravaged like the rapture was upon us. His assault on my clit with his fingers was equally wild. The unrestrained thrust sped up with no end in sight. My whimpers heightened as I bounced between pain and pleasure.

"Milo, please," I sobbed, unsure if I was asking him to finish or begging for more. Turned out it was both as he flicked my clit while his vicious plunges pierced me from the inside.

I exclaimed, reaching my peak. All the same, tears bubbled from the pain of his intrusion and swollen cock.

Milo pounded harder, pelvis smacking against my ass without restraint. With demented lust, he took out every ounce of his madness on my body until it screamed in pain.

“Holy shit. Fuck, baby,” Milo roared. His hips kept pumping into me until every bit of his warm liquid spilled inside and out of me.

Afterward, I smoothed my dress down and used a tissue to wipe off remnants of cum on my thighs and his blood off my breasts. My respite was short-lived when I realized the day’s drama was yet to conclude.

“We shld gt marrd,” Milo mumbled under his breath at the same time I realized the first-aid kit was in the bathroom.

“What?”

He sighed deeply. “I said we should get married.”

I felt like a bucket of ice-cold water was dumped on me.

“Tomorrow,” Milo announced. “We can work out the paperwork later. There’s a church nearby—”

“Church?” I nearly choked on the word. We used to joke about stepping foot inside a church, convinced we’d both go up in flames. “Neither of us believes in God and our families wouldn’t be there.”

“Why does that matter?” he asked agitatedly.

“Guess I had this unreasonable expectation of having a say over my own wedding.”

“We are all mistaken at times,” he retorted, earning him an unimpressed look.

Today was a harsh reminder of how Milo sporadically molded the truth to fit his worst fears. Like a self-fulfilling prophecy, his qualms would eventually become a reality if he continued exhibiting more erratic

behavior. So, it was difficult to partake in happiness when the blatant reminder lay all around us of how Milo reacted based on crazy theories. The complete disregard for Mr. Whiskers sat high on that list.

“Why do you want to get married?” I asked without a hint of delight.

“Are you serious? So, we could be done with this shit. I don’t have to worry about you and him anymore.”

“Wow.” Shaking my head, I threw both of my hands up in surrender.

“What?”

“Milo, I can’t marry you to make you trust me.”

Truth be told, I wanted to marry Milo more than anything in this world. I’d marry him right here in the living room of this villa, but what should be the happiest moment in our lives was currently covered with broken glass and chaos.

“I am going out for a walk.”

“No,” he said as I spun to exit, grabbing my flip-flops with a swift scoop. Milo wasn’t quick enough to follow me out.

Ignoring his resounding warnings about leaving the premises, I sprinted outside.



By the time I returned home, it was dusk.

I turned on the lights to be met with an empty room. The glass on the floor had been cleaned up, no doubt an effort by the butler. Remnants of the spat remained, some of the damage too irreparable to fix within the day.

“Mr. Whiskers,” I called out, searching for my dog. When I saw Mr. Whiskers’ empty crate, I stopped short.

As a rule of thumb, I ignored statements hotheaded Sinclair kids made under duress. However, I wondered if I should have taken Milo's threats more seriously. I could understand if my partner acted out after he was triggered, but if he hurt my dog in any way...

I combed through the bungalow for a second time. This time, I found a note from Milo.

Be back soon.

-Milo

Falling on an intact chair, I fervently started dialing Milo's number.



Milo

I was surprised to walk through the doorway and find a distraught Raven. "Rave?"

Raven charged to grab Mr. Whiskers nestled in my hold. He refused to walk the last stretch home, so I finally had to carry his lazy butt.

"How could you take him?" Raven fumed.

I shrugged. "I assumed Mr. Whiskers might enjoy a longer walk."

"He hates long walks. He feels safer in his crate than he does with you. I'll ask you again. Where were you, and why did you take him?"

"I was thinking about giving him away."

Grabbing the first item nearby, a hairbrush, Raven chucked it in my direction. "What is wrong with you?" she screamed.

Raven continued to throw items. Some of them hit me; the rest hit the wall behind me. The butler was displeased at the state of this villa when I called

him to clean up, though I left a hefty tip. However, the resort might kick us out if we incurred more damages.

“Rave, stop it,” I warned.

Turning on her heels, Raven ran to the bedroom. I trailed her steps to find her standing by the bay window, Mr. Whiskers held against her chest.

Yes, it was sadistic to give her dog away.

I spent months resenting my family for destroying my relationship with Raven. However, it wasn't them; it was me. Our family might incite the situation, but at every turn, I was the one who progressed it.

After Raven left, I found a local yoga resort in Tulum that fostered street dogs. Once I pulled into their driveway, I couldn't do it, remembering this was yet one more of those moments where I'd make the situation worse.

Minutes passed before Raven acknowledged my presence. “How could you be so jealous of Reid that you'd give my dog away?” she asked icily.

Months ago, Raven posted a photo on Instagram. The background of the picture was of a homeless man dressed in some of my finest clothes. Excitement coursed me when I realized it was Raven's retaliation for my impromptu departure.

For the first time since I left New York, I felt alive.

Raven's lack of reaction always drove me insane. She acted indifferent toward me, while I reacted easily to her.

Staring at her Instagram, a realization dawned on me. The night at the brownstone when Raven started hitting me. Raven's acts of retribution after I left. Her subconscious, adverse reactions.

Good or bad, I was the only person who could turn a non-reactive Raven into a ticking timebomb. It was confirmation of her love in the oddest of forms.

So, I pushed her buttons. It became imperative that her most visceral traits: warmth, selflessness, and affection, could only be tainted by me. Not the

healthiest outlook, but invigorating, nonetheless. When Raven declared we needed to mitigate our conversations to set a better example for Mia, I feared she wasn't concerned with my actions anymore. I became manic.

A few months later, Reid accepted my offer to travel to California for a liver transplant. I didn't want Raven there, worried if Reid saw us together, the past about Mia might resurface.

However, my intentions served a dual purpose. For people like Raven and myself, one of the worst things in life was not feeling needed. If she couldn't take care of me after a major operation, it would infuriate her and prove I still affected her. So, I specifically asked Reid not to bring her.

The problem was my plan worked a little too well. In exacting revenge for my decision, Raven burnt some mementos I'd given her. While doing so, she accidentally burnt down the entire kitchen—something that could have killed her.

Thrill and exhilaration were no longer the emotions I felt. Anger was what I felt. Death was what I saw. All directed toward me.

The worst part was I didn't find out until my siblings visited me in California. I couldn't hold back anymore. I had to see Raven, and for once, I had the support of both of my siblings.

To ostracize Reid was ridiculous. The same person who pressed for our separation was the one to orchestrate bringing us back together. He was a genius, predicting what Raven needed when I couldn't. It was the reason why that dog burned me. He could provide Raven with something I couldn't—safety.

"I didn't give your dog away," I reminded her. "I only considered it."

"Even so," Raven seethed, "you had no right. Reid and I maintain our distance. Other than to check on his health, I don't reach out to him. Why would you do this?"

"I'm sorry," I said sincerely.

"You owe me a better answer than that. Why?" she pressed.

“Because it was supposed to be you and him,” I admitted through gritted teeth.

“What?”

“You two have this cosmic connection—”

“Enough,” Raven cut me off by slashing the air in front of her with one hand. “Do you hear how insane you sound?”

“I spent years watching you two share telepathic conversations. How do you think it makes me feel that Reid knew exactly how to heal you twice when I couldn’t do it once?” I professed.

Following my outburst, Raven heaved a sigh. She let Mr. Whiskers down and moved closer to me.

“Reid knew what I needed to put my past behind because we grew up together,” Raven started gently. “We can have telepathic conversations because we spent so much of our childhood together. The way Reid and I grew up changed how I perceived him—like my twin, not a romantic partner.”

Tamping down her residual anger, Raven smiled sadly.

Waving a hand between us, she said, “You and I spent far less time together in comparison, yet our bond is more significant. It’s the only romantic one I have known.”

“But you admitted to loving Reid when you two were young. Reid loves you as well.”

Raven blew out a long breath, determined eyes rapidly moving all over my face. “I was five years old when I loved Reid. It wasn’t real.”

I scoffed, wishing it were enough to alleviate my qualms. “You want me to believe that? You two were born together, made for each other. Adolescent feelings or not, you felt something for him, and he knows how to... fix you. It’s as if the entire universe is screaming you belong with him.”

“You’re right,” she confessed. “The stars were aligned to fate Reid and me. Everything lined up perfectly. Our connection, our parents, the fact I didn’t have adverse reactions around him.”

Clasping both hands on the side of my face, she turned me to face her.

“And still, we defied all odds to fall in love. We aren’t easy by any means, but nothing worth having is meant to be easy. I’d rather be on an infinite road to recovery with you than be without you. So, where does that leave me?”

“Then how come our families keep coming between us?”

“There will always be external issues in a relationship,” Raven said exasperatedly. “You keep giving them the power to tear us apart. You left because of a fight with your brother and sister. Yet you refuse to tell me why.”

My heart pounded. “Nothing happened.”

“So, you didn’t want me there during your surgery because ‘nothing happened’?”

“No,” I yelled in frustration. “I was worried you’d learn something awful. And the moment you found out, you’d choose them over me. Again. You always protected their feelings. You always cared more about them.”

“It wasn’t because I cared less about you,” Raven stumbled, caught off-guard. “It was... I assumed you’d be okay. Because you were the adult, and they were the kids,” Raven stated. “You always took care of them, so they never learned how to take care of themselves. If I didn’t keep an eye on Reid, he’d go off the handle partying and drinking. Mia always deviated whenever someone wasn’t constantly on her case, but I didn’t see you that way. Does any of this make sense?”

I blinked, clearing the haze for the first time today.

It made more sense than anything else.

It was the parent versus child complex. You expected the grown-up to be alright, so you cared for the children. However, Raven miscalculated. Without Raven, Reid held his own while I was the one to regress.

“It makes perfect sense,” I admitted, grabbing her hand and gently brushing my lips over her knuckles. “Despite everything, they grew up okay. Didn’t they?”

“Better than okay,” Raven reassured with a smile. “They are all on a good path, including our parents; and you know what? If we make up with them, we can easily monitor to ensure they stay the course.”

I rolled my eyes. “Maybe.”

Perhaps Raven was right. We couldn’t avoid our parents forever, but if we kept them at arm’s length, we could maintain a cordial relationship.

I geared up for one last question, the answer I needed to move forward.

“Raven, did something happen between you and Reid while we were apart?” Raven opened her mouth, but I continued, my body rigid. “It doesn’t change anything between us, but I need to know.”

Raven closed her eyes. “For me, it’s either you or no one. I already gave away everything to you. My romantic feelings. My sexual needs. My every emotion. I’m yours.”

My forehead dropped to hers, a relief like I had never known washing over at the validation. We shared the same truth.

It’s either her or no one.

I forgot it at times, but Raven reminded me.

“Do you still want to know what happened with Mia and Reid?” I asked, voice resonating with trepidation.

Raven peeked at me through her lashes apprehensively. “Everything is fixed between you three?”

“I believe so.”

“You know what? Thank you for offering to tell me.” Raven lifted both of her shoulders. “But if you don’t want to talk about this, I’m ready to let it go. I trust you,” she announced. “I just wanted to know you trusted me, too. Our past doesn’t define our future any longer.”

I silently held her, wiping her tears away. Without a word, Raven took my hand and led me to the bathroom. Like her shadow, I moved with her as I’d follow her to the edge of the world and the end of life.



Raven

For months, I had asked Milo what transpired between him, Reid, and Mia. There was peace in my soul that he was finally willing to share. Knowing how hard it was for Milo, the simple willingness was suddenly enough.

After all, I had my secrets about Brandon. None of those details mattered anymore, as it was inconsequential to our big picture.

Taking his hand, I led a puzzled Milo to the bathroom. He watched me reach for the first-aid kit. Alleviated by our heart-to-heart, I found myself relatively content despite scouring for gauze and antiseptic.

An anomaly occurred as I cleaned off the scrapes already forming into lumps on Milo’s knuckles. His thumb gently caressed my newly formed bruises from our rough tumble when my face was smashed against the wall.

While I placed the gauze on his knuckles, he reached for something inside the box and patted a cool ointment on my heated skin. I winced at the sensation but let him use his fingertips to apply the balm until it was evenly distributed.

Milo’s fingers drifted into my hair, a ghost of a smile displayed on his features. His small joy wrenched a smile out of me with a mutual understanding behind our beaming faces.

While we remedied each other's injuries, both the physical scars and the emotional ones, we signed a silent pact. It was a pact we'd inadvertently follow for years to come.

The promise to heal the pain caused by the other while being the anchor we both needed.

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PART FOUR

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WINTER

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CHAPTER 8

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THE PAST
A YEAR WITHOUT YOU - WINTER 2020



Raven

“HEY, STUD.” I LOOKED UP AT REID WITH ENTHUSIASM I DIDN’T FEEL. I SAT on his bedroom floor, going over new transplant centers, though it led to the same conclusion.

“Hey, Beautiful.” Reid lifted his head off the pillow, finally awake.

“How was your nap?” I asked.

Reid pulled himself to a sitting position and yawned. “Not long enough. Dying is exhausting.”

Recently, Reid had been cracking more morbid jokes. Dark comedy was his defense mechanism, so I played along.

“Want me to push you down the stairs to expedite the process?” I asked with a straight face.

“That’s so 2020, and you already did it. I’d rather not die by copying someone else. It should be more original. Ugh. Why couldn’t I die of something cool?”

“How about I stab you?” I suggested. “That’s something cool.”

Reid grimaced. “I don’t like blood.”

“Drowning?”

“What am I, five?”

“Got it.” I sat up. “Drowning by alcohol?”

Reid’s eyes lit up. “If I can’t drink it, I’ll drown in it. Poetic justice.”

“Fantastic. You go to the store and buy some beer. I can come back early from work tonight, and we can drown you at six p.m.”

“I can’t do six. I have to meet up with Sam. How about at eight p.m.?”

“Done.”

We looked at each other for a moment and fell over in a fit of laughter. The lack of alcohol changed Reid’s personality drastically. He wasn’t as angry or short-tempered anymore. Just the average amount of ‘Sinclair-rage.’

Which was good news since I needed Reid to remain in a good mood for the upcoming repeat discussion.

“I have to talk to you about something.”

Reid cocked his head.

“It’s about Milo’s offer to be your living donor—”

“Raven—”

“Before you say no again, I want to remind you nothing else has come through, and there’s no risk to Milo. Not to mention, you have a better chance at a successful transplant with a living donor who’s your brother. So, your hesitancy makes no sense.”

“Relax, Rave. There is no—”

“Both of us want to see you alive,” I cut Reid off. After weeks of failure to secure something for Reid, I was at my wit’s end.

“Dude, can I get a word in—”

“Is this because of what you think happened between Milo and me?”

I stared at Reid blankly, who closed his eyes. “Raven,” he said quietly. “Please.”

“At this point, you are only destroying yourself to punish him.”



Reid

Raven sat on the floor, highlighting reports scattered around the coffee table. Like a woman on a mission, she was spouting angry words at me; her hazel eyes lit up with passion.

She was cute.

After years of manipulation at the hands of the Sinclairs, sweet and naïve Raven had learned a few tricks. I couldn’t be prouder.

She had succeeded where Milo failed. She figured out how to handle our parents and kept our sister in check. Using guilt trips and optimism, Raven swayed my decision about agreeing to Milo as my donor.

Initially, I turned down Milo’s offer because he had done enough for this family without having to impart with his very organs. Without us, Milo was finally doing well. He was trying new things, went on a road trip around the West Coast, and looked happy.

Yet, when I saw the packages Milo sent me, I realized he wasn’t ready to stop being Mr. Fix-It. I finally picked up the phone to call him.

Looking at it from Milo’s perspective, a lifetime habit of taking care of others couldn’t be so easily broken. My rejection of his offer was killing him.

“Are you done?” I asked when her rambling ended. “I talked to Milo yesterday. I’m going to California for the transplant.”

“You did?” Looking stunned, Raven laid down her highlighter.

“Hmm.”

“Oh... I didn’t... when do we leave—”

I mentally prepared for the next bit. She wouldn’t like any of it, but I had decided it was for the best. “I’m leaving soon, but there are a few things we need to talk about.”

“Shoot.”

“Listen, Beautiful... I have been thinking about this a lot.” I shifted uncomfortably. “I don’t want you or any parents coming to California with me.”

Raven blinked. “Excuse me?”

Despite Milo’s suspicions, I had no intention of pursuing Raven again.

I had a 75% percent chance of surviving the next five years. By the time I was forty-two, I’d have a 50-50 shot at being alive.

I couldn’t drag Raven into that uncertain life.

However, I couldn’t leave her suffering in Milo’s hands either. Right before Mia started college, I saw Brandon storming out of the house and overheard Raven and Mia arguing behind closed doors. From the little I heard, Raven admitted to Mia that she viewed her relationship with Milo as a mistake.

Likewise, Milo was moving on for the better. He simply needed a clean break from the stress of carrying an entire household. He’d move past this fixation on Raven.

Milo and Raven were both on a great track. It’d be ridiculous to relinquish all their hard work now.

“I think it’ll be better this way.” I knew Raven and the entire family would insist on coming along to California, but I was putting my foot down.

“How can you say that? You are both undergoing major surgery. Who the hell is supposed to take care of you?”

“Mia is coming with me.” I glanced at Raven, who was startled by the revelation.

“Mia and Milo made up?”

I shrugged, unsure of the details myself. “I don’t know. I passed the phone to Mia because he insisted on talking to her. Mia came in here afterward, announcing she was coming with me.”

“I’m glad they made up, but it’s still a huge undertaking—”

“It was Milo’s decision, too,” I informed because it was true.

I told Milo of all the great things Raven had embarked on. Milo was proud of her accomplishments and agreed she shouldn’t be there.

“You are both going under,” Raven said quietly. “He’d rather go through it alone instead of seeing me—”

“No,” I cut her off, despising every moment of this conversation. “It’s not that. He also thought it would be better this way, so there weren’t any issues...” I trailed off, scrambling for a way to make this better.

Raven’s wounded face was enough to twist my heart from the inside out. She stared at me like Milo once did during a similar instant—betrayed.

Inaudibly, Raven collected the paperwork from the table and strode out of the room without a backward glance.



It was ironic.

Raven was obsessed with healing me from my physical disease, just as I was obsessed with curing Raven of her mental one. With the improvement in her physical appearance, I believed her to be on a spiritual path of wellness. I was promptly proven incorrect.

There was a box containing Raven's most prized possessions. Apparently, she had saved a plethora of notes from Milo inside that box. After our conversation and my admission that Milo thought it'd be best if she didn't come along to California, Raven silently exited my room. Scouring her own, she found that box and carried it to the kitchen sink, ultimately lighting a match inside it. She burnt everything, nearly taking the kitchen down with the flames.

Upon smelling smoke and hearing the commotion, I charged downstairs in time to find Raven fumbling to retrieve the fire extinguisher before it considerably overheated. I shoved her aside and took control.

Raven didn't mean for the fire to get out of hand. She was counting on turning on the sink faucet after burning the contents of the box. However, as Raven didn't cook often, she had no clue the water pipe to the kitchen was shut off yesterday. That girl was no Martha Stewart, and this incident wouldn't help her reputation inside a kitchen.

While Raven hid in her room, I handled the successive hysterics of our parents. I assured them it was an accident, but I had no idea how we'd convince the insurance company of the same. Nonetheless, I took photos to document the damages to file an insurance claim.

By the time I dealt with the mess, it was nearly nighttime. Heading upstairs, I opened the door to Raven's room. She turned from her computer, eyeing me guiltily. Our dialogue was limited, relying on our telepathy to bypass small talk.

"Why?" I got right to the point.

Raven appeared skeptical, deciding how to proceed. There was no need for excuses since I could smell her bullshit better than the kitchen fire from earlier.

"You know how we sometimes get a pass on things? That's what I need right now."

"Rave, you nearly burnt the kitchen—"

“I’ll pay for it.”

“Insurance will cover it, but that’s not the point.”

“In that case, I’d like to be alone.”

“Rave—”

“Please, Reid. Leave me alone.”

I walked backward out of her room with a perplexed nod, leaving the door open to look at her from outside. I never pegged Raven as volatile or impulsive. I was hell-bent on molding her out of this fixation over Milo, never expecting her to be the one who’d scare me more than him.

Raven had grown so much over the last few months. She was physically stronger and mentally capable of handling herself against the most vicious people, including Sinclairs. She was also a savvy businesswoman. Raven had healed mentally and physically, and I credited those changes to Milo’s absence.

As I stared at the lone figure, the vision declared that none of those things mattered to her. The rest was an empty façade when the essential ingredient in her life was missing.

For the first time since we excavated Raven and Milo’s tumultuous past, I wondered if I had made a terrible mistake.

A Few Months Later



“Do you remember when Reid watched all the MasterChef reruns and thought he was a professional cook?”

Milo laughed at Mia’s upturned face while I rolled my eyes. “A little sympathy for a man in pain?”

Mia ignored my plea. “And remember when he tried to cook an entire chicken in sixty minutes because he saw Gordon Ramsay do it? The chicken was still frozen on the inside.”

Milo grimaced at the reminder. “Oh, God. Don’t remind me. He insisted we eat it. I am pretty sure we were all one bite away from salmonella.”

I used the ‘dead man’ card one too many times to make demands, so Mia and Milo decided to pretend I was dead. They were doing a roast at my funeral. Welcome to the Sinclair family’s sense of humor. And people wondered where I got it from.

Shortly after celebrating Christmas, Mia and I left for California to prep for my surgery.

Since our move to California, I had been picking up on the subtle hints about the variances in Milo’s personality. Though he kept a cheery attitude, everything was odd about Milo, down to his new unshaven look. Initially, I thought he was living a new life, free from us, but as I ascertained the disastrous condition of his condo, I wasn’t sure anymore. Never had I known Milo not to keep a tidy place.

Milo and I went through our operations a few weeks ago. Following his procedure, Milo was released shortly after, while I stayed longer. I was released today and transported back to his apartment. Both Mia and Milo had been annoyingly present since. They were mocking me but were really distracting me from the pain. Honestly, I’d rather have downtime on this couch to sort through my Netflix options.

However, I hadn’t voiced my preference. Milo and Mia made up, and for the first time, they were cracking jokes together. I didn’t want to break up this little reunion.

Milo reached out to Mia on numerous occasions over the last year, hoping to make up. The first olive branch Mia accepted was his invitation to come along on this trip.

Despite his actions, I couldn’t let Mia believe the worst of Milo. The fallout with Milo was affecting her worse than I had imagined. Mia had been

acting uncharacteristically since their fight.

All three of us were on the same page about one thing. Mia didn't need to drown in our shit. The rest of us were messed up. We needed at least one Sinclair to graduate unscathed from the fuckery of that household. We all put our money on Mia, and I wasn't giving up.

Over the weeks, I watered down Milo and Raven's past to convince Mia of the same lie Raven had spouted. Mia didn't believe Raven's explanations because it was in Raven's genes to protect the people she loved. However, Mia knew I had nothing to gain from lying.

I asserted that whatever transpired between Mia and Milo was an isolated incident. There wasn't a conventional answer. Mia understood her accusations hit home for Milo, and he lost it because of the pressures from work and responsibilities at home. I further insisted that Milo never hit Raven, a detail I was starting to believe myself with each passing day.

Whenever I brought up the topic of consent, Raven dodged me, which indicated it had happened. However, she vehemently maintained Milo never hit her.

Now that Mia was blissfully ignorant again, she made amends with Milo without her conscience acting as a hindrance. She had returned to a unicorn bubble where the sky was pink, and I'd kill any fucker who tried to convince my baby sister otherwise.

"Yuck," Mia made a face, making me wonder if I should go ahead and ruin her new picture-perfect world. "At least it was better than his American Idol phase."

"Hey, asshole. I'm still sitting right here."

"I believe it was a dual phase for both of them." Milo quirked an eyebrow. "Reid and Raven wouldn't stop singing along to every song on the damn show. Do you know how many of my favorite songs those two ruined?"

Milo sucked in a breath upon recognizing he had mentioned Raven's name yet again. He did it frequently—brought Raven up without meaning to do

so. Every time he did, Milo's aura changed.

Yesterday, we disclosed Raven's kitchen fire incident to Milo. Since then, there had been a dark cloud over his head. Milo was struggling.

Quickly brushing over the sour topic, I charged ahead. "I am an excellent singer. Way to throw a dead man under the bus with no way of defending himself."

"Are you serious? You've been defending yourself the whole time."

"But you two are pretending I'm dead. So, technically, you can't hear my protests."

Mia and I continued to argue, subconsciously distracting Milo instead of me because his pain was transparently greater than mine.

"I'm going to make a sandwich. Do you guys want anything?" Milo asked, no doubt disturbed by the mention of Raven's name.

As soon as Mia and I shook our heads, Milo left the room. Mia gave me a shoulder nudge and a pointed head nod. Exchanging a knowing look, I pulled myself to standing.

With a deep sigh, I followed Milo out of the room and into the kitchen. "Hey, you okay?" I inquired casually.

"Yeah." He turned slightly in my direction before scouring the fridge again. There was no food inside it, yet another irregularity in Milo's behavior pattern.

"Hmm, I can see that." I arched my eyebrow at the empty fridge Milo blankly stared at.

Giving up the facade, Milo closed the refrigerator door and turned to me, crossing his arms in front of his chest. "What's up?"

"Nothing. Just wanted to see how long you can pretend there's food inside the fridge."

Milo blessed me with his signature scowl. "Got something to say, Reid?"

"Plenty," I admitted, warily watching Milo's demeanor. Seconds passed as Milo waited for me to emphasize the 'plenty' I had to say. "She is in Mexico," I finally announced.

"Who?"

I ignored Milo's insistence to maintain this charade. It had been killing him since learning about Raven's accident. He wouldn't rest easy any time soon. "I think you should go see her."

I remained apathetic while Milo stared at me quizzically, face covered with suspicion. "That's a different tune than the one you had been singing."

"According to you, I have no tune."

Milo rolled his eyes at me. "You think I have been sitting on my ass all this time waiting for your permission to go see her?" he asked with an edge to his tone.

Surprised by Milo's words, my brows furrowed on their own. "I... I thought ___"

"You thought wrong," he interjected. "I knew she wasn't doing well before our talk. If she hurts herself again—" Milo averted his gaze as if unable to withstand the thought.

I shrugged noncommittally. Raven wouldn't do that anymore. She watched me in pain for a year. She understood firsthand when one of us suffered, the others suffered alongside us. There was no way she'd put everyone else through that again.

"She won't, and Mia won't tell her what transpired between you two."

Milo showed no reaction outwardly, but his attention was piqued. "What happened to Mia's moral compass?"

"She realized it was overrated."

It was Mia's prerogative whether Raven should be informed of what happened with Milo. Instead, Mia was the one to suggest Milo should visit Raven in Mexico.

We had been watching Milo walk around like a ghost since our arrival. We both expected Milo's new life to be uplifting, but it was clear he had declined into a pit of everlasting sorrow. The same was true of Raven.

"Neither of us wants to see you guys this sad. While we don't understand your dynamics, it's evident it can't go on like this for either of your sakes."

I had a feeling Milo didn't give two shits what we thought of their relationship. His only worry was Raven hurting herself. It was the reason Milo managed to stay away.

"She won't hurt herself again," I confirmed more confidently. "That doesn't mean you can do whatever you want. If there's a hint of a repeat of past behaviors, Mia will bring down her wrath. I'm sure neither of us wants that." I looked Milo over with as much menace as I could muster in my condition.

My half-attempt at a threat made Milo smirk. There was something in his features I hadn't seen since my arrival in California. It was his first genuine smile. He was cautiously optimistic that Raven might be healed from her past trauma.

"Noted," he said slyly before marching out.

My doubts about those two would never be put to rest, but my conclusion was finally drawn. Raven and Milo might kill each other in their tumultuous relationship. However, being alive without the other person was a fate worse than death for both.



Raven

It had been a few months since the living donor transplant.

I was surprised by Reid's change of heart to accept Milo as a donor, yet not at all. With the increase in parcels, informational brochures sent our way, and various email subscriptions Milo no doubt signed us up for, I knew

Milo was growing hopeless at the thought of Reid's deteriorating health. Honestly, so was I.

Fortunately, everything went better than expected, with both boys recovering well. Unable to help myself, I incessantly bugged Mia for updates. She tried her best to contact me, indisputably busy in her efforts to take care of her brothers while continuing her college curriculum online.

After our last phone conversation, I left the ball in his court. I felt wretched upon learning Milo didn't want me around while undergoing major surgery. Initially, my heart would lurch at the reminder every time, and I'd unconsciously rub my chest to heal the imaginary wound. However, now I was glad the three of them had this time to bury the hatchet.

Whatever transpired, it was evident I was the common denominator. I maintained my distance, only reaching out to Mia occasionally for updates on the boys. Mia sent me regular texts and emails. One of her emails was particularly eye-opening. She revealed running into Brandon and his new 'side piece' in California. Though initially furious, Mia was relieved over not throwing away life-changing opportunities based on his advice. Mia expressed disappointment in herself for getting carried away on a whim and admitted she was happy with her decision to go to Yale while attending beauty school on the side.

With her bond with Milo restored, she realized the folly in her entanglement with Brandon. Her conversations with Milo had put to rest her trepidations over our relationship as well. Mia suggested defying Reid's wishes and visiting them on the West Coast.

I turned down Mia's idea. Instead, I booked a trip to Mexico for Alexa's wedding. Alexa recently got engaged to the man of her dreams. He owned a few hotels in Mexico, so she'd be moving to Tulum temporarily. She invited me along to work remotely and help her with wedding planning during my downtime. Milo was allowed to travel again now that his physical condition had been restored. I had hoped he'd attend but was disappointed to learn he'd turned down the invite.

Within the first week of my arrival in Mexico, I received an eye-opening letter from Reid. The letter was more of a poem, and I must have re-read it a thousand times. The ending was succinct: Reid and I wouldn't be in each other's lives moving forward.

As I stared at the text that just came through, I finally understood the motives behind Reid's letter.

Milo: I'm coming to Mexico. Meet me at Alexa's engagement party.

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DESTINY

Our love story is a tale as old as time.

There was once a Boy and a Girl.

Boy loved Girl. Girl loved Boy.

It was the innocent sort of love—the type of love you experience during the tenderest moments of your childhood. You hold hands, peck each other on the cheeks, and promise to be together forever and ever and ever. Everyone laughed and said it was cute.

As they aged, the Girl dismissed the silly notions and grew out of them. The Boy did not. As time went on, the Girl became enthralled with another, a Man who held the keys to their lives. So, when the Boy found out his time on earth was limited, he had no choice but to step away. What love could a dying man give to a girl like that?

So, he stayed away... until he found out the truth.

It wasn't love. It was insanity. The only way a love like that could end is in death, with bloodshed and the destruction of one another.

The Boy panicked. He knew he had to save them both.

The Boy tried to convince the Girl. She refused.

The Boy tried to convince the Man. He refused.

Their abusive relationship had reached a level he couldn't surmise. So, he did the only thing that felt right to him. He intervened.

The Boy and the Girl had a journey of their own. They spent a whole year together, healing one another as they both saw fit.

Their story had it all. Laughter. Joy. Adventure. Love... but a different version than the one the Boy had envisioned. There was nothing harmful about their love. The Boy loved the Girl more than before. In return, the Girl gave the Boy the best year of his life.

He was fulfilled and grateful for those moments.

As time dwindled, the Boy knew she wasn't happy. Her heart belonged to another, and no amount of pretense could change that fact. In the end, the Boy admitted insanity was the Girl and the Man's form of love.

The Girl and the Boy had taught each other a mantra, live, heal, laugh. With the Man's help, the Boy healed the Girl just like the Girl healed the Boy.

The Boy had given her all the tools to make her stronger. He realized there was nothing more he could do except step away. The Boy still didn't agree with the love the Girl and the Man shared. But he knew the Girl could face the Man this time without destroying herself.

That reassurance finally allowed the Boy to let the Girl go.

I will love you until my last breath, but I hope you understand why only one of us can remain in your life because I finally understand why it had to be him.

-Reid

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CHAPTER 9

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THE PRESENT
A YEAR WITH YOU - WINTER, 2021



Milo

SHE WAS NERVOUS. SHE ALWAYS WORE MORE MAKEUP WHENEVER SHE WAS nervous. The formal dress Raven sported for a casual lunch with our parents further confirmed my suspicions. It was the fashion designer in her. She believed appearance changed our moods.

When you look confident, you feel confident. It was one of Raven's mottos.

As if it would appease the awkwardness of today's luncheon with our parents. With the holidays around the corner, Raven twisted my arm into rekindling my relationship with them. Apparently, healthy relationships were all about compromise.

Dad now worked full-time at his clinic. Uncle John's license was officially reinstated, so he practiced alongside Dad. Mom oversaw Raven's boutique as her on-site manager, while Theresa supervised the fifteen seamstresses who worked under Raven.

While Tessa's issues were still ongoing, her bond with Theresa and working at the shop had given her a new purpose.

As for Reid, he was temporarily living in my condo in California. Following his transplant, he never moved back. He was avoiding seeing Raven and me together.

“You okay?” I squeezed Raven’s hand.

“Yeah, I am fine,” Raven said in a soft, husky voice.

As I stopped in front of the brownstone, Raven turned to face me and pressed a kiss on my lips.

“What was that for?”

Raven shrugged. “A thank you for doing this.”

Unable to help myself, I asked, “If things don’t go well—”

“Then you don’t have to see them for another year and a half,” Raven responded without hesitation, though it would kill her. Raven’s forehead landed on my chest, then she got on her tippy-toes to kiss me again. “But I hope it doesn’t come to that. Anytime you want to leave, squeeze my hand.” She wrapped her arms around my neck, lighting up my entire world. “Don’t worry; I’ll protect you from the big, bad wolf.”

“I think I’m the only big bad wolf you have to worry about,” I growled in a low voice, bending slightly to kiss her. A quick kiss turned messy when Raven clasped her hands behind my neck.

We were making out in the middle of the street when the door flung open. Of course, it was my brat of a little sister, though she wasn’t so little anymore, nor was she a brat. Watching her grow up felt like the fruits of our labor coming to fruition. Mia was the only Sinclair kid to get out of this house without scars. She was perfect.

Well, except for one thing—her blue hair.

“Hi guys,” Mia squealed excitedly, pulling us inside for hugs. “I missed you so much,” she gushed.

“I missed you, too, babe,” Raven squealed back.

“You two saw each other at breakfast,” I reminded. “So, I heard blond hair is the ‘in’ look this season,” I suggested, though they both waved off my sardonic comment. “It doesn’t have to be blonde. There are other colors. Brown—”

“Everyone is waiting for you guys,” Mia interjected.

“Red—”

“And blue,” Mia finished. “Now, let’s go to the dining room.”

Raven tugged at my hand to lead us to the dining room, presumably to divert my attention from Mia’s appalling hair. “How’s the mood in there?” I asked Mia.

“The only way to find out is by walking in.”

Raven and I both took a deep breath as she squeezed my hand hard enough to break it.

“Easy, baby,” I murmured against her ear.

“Oh, sorry.” Raven relaxed her hold and visibly swallowed. We walked into the dining room hand in hand. And...

“Hi,” Tessa cried first.

“Oh, my God, my baby. How are you?” Theresa squealed.

“Son.” Dad grinned ear to ear as he took me in for a hug.

“I missed you, honey,” Raven’s dad gave her a sloppy kiss on the cheek.

As they inspected us, we were passed off from parent to parent and engulfed in more hugs. By the end, Raven and I had been kissed more times than a newborn baby. I wiped off smears of Theresa’s lipstick from my cheek with the back of my hand, only to notice the giant banner hanging on the dining room wall.

Welcome Home!

“Are you sure that banner is big enough?”

They turned in unison to look at the banner and promptly started laughing.

It turned out our absence provided the parents with a new perspective on life. Since our move to the villa in Mexico, Raven barely took their calls. Without either of the responsible family members around, who generally picked up their slack, our parents received a lesson in independence. The more independent they became, the more they realized the fallout from their neglect and how long we had been coddling them.

They didn't care I had been ignoring this family for the last year and a half or that Raven had ghosted them months ago. They were just happy to see us.

Throughout lunch, it was evident our parents were also ecstatic about our union. After understanding the struggle, they put both Raven and me through, they truly wanted us to be happy because it was our turn.

We spent the day with our families yesterday and stayed the night at the brownstone. Our dads weren't happy with us sleeping together, but Raven painted my old bedroom pink, so staying here last night was no cakewalk for me either.

I watched Raven from the bed. She sat at my desk, reading up on a new research program for Tessa, who remained a train wreck. Something took over as I watched her determined face, ready to do the impossible for the people she loved.

The assurance of having our families in our corner did change things. We were finally together without all the other bullshit.

"Rave," I called for her attention.

"Yeah?" Raven said without looking up.

“Will you marry me—”

“Yes,” Raven cut me off. She didn’t look up from her paperwork. It was as if I had asked if Chinese was okay for dinner tonight.

“Did you hear my question?” I asked cautiously.

“Did you hear my answer?”

I had been walking around with this question for far too long, which made her answer... irritating. “How the hell is that any way to respond to the question I asked?”

Raven still didn’t look up. “And how the hell is that any way to ask such a question?”

For once, I wanted to create better memories in this house. In my haste to accomplish it, I got carried away. This was my second lousy proposal.

Considering I had intended to drop to one knee and pop the question while the allegations of our improper relation were still fresh, one would think I had enough time to rehearse by now. Not to mention, I also planned a big old grand proposal for Raven a year and a half ago on her twenty-second birthday.

We separated before it could happen. Although now, I realize it made no difference. Raven didn’t care about superficial gestures.

I stalked toward her. Grabbing the highlighter out of Raven’s hand, I took a knee. “Raven Beckett, will you make me the happiest man on earth by marrying me?”

“Where is my ring?” she inquired instead of responding to my ‘proper’ proposal.

This had to be a record for the number of worst proposals in a row. Instead of a grand gesture, I had a sentimental bit planned for the proposal, and I even bombed that. “This is going great,” I muttered under my breath.

Shaking the treats in my pocket, I signaled for the ring, which I had previously forgotten to do. Mr. Whiskers ran into the room at the sound of

treats. I had stationed his crate in the bathroom and hooked the ring to his collar so he could be a part of the proposal.

“Oh, my God,” Raven jumped up and down on her chair, clapping her hands when Mr. Whiskers came charging in. He had a small board hanging around his neck that said:

Say YES!

I spent hours training Mr. Whiskers to answer the call to treat because nothing else worked. The dog practically fished into my pants for treats as I attempted to pry the ring off his collar. Meanwhile, Raven praised the dog, telling him how good he was for surprising her. I smiled only because it made her smile.

Raven held her hands to her chest, eyes ramping up with tears. “I can’t believe you included him. This is the sweetest thing you have done.”

Taking her face between both hands, I quickly kissed her tears away. There’d be no more tears in this house, happy or otherwise.

Suddenly, a previous oversight occurred to me.

“How did you know about the ring? For all you knew, I didn’t buy one.” I narrowed my eyes at a guilty-looking Raven.

“Umm... we live together, and you keep the box on your nightstand.” Raven sheepishly smiled as I shook my head.

“Are no more sacred places left for a man to hide his personal belongings?”

“Not if you are getting married,” Raven dismissively retorted, still poking her head around impatiently for my progress at attaining the ring. “Eek,” she squealed when I pulled it off Mr. Whiskers’ collar. Raven tried to grab it frantically while I held it out of her reach.

Never had I seen anyone be this excited over something so... frugal.

To be frank, it tainted my ego to give her an engagement ring that cost the same as one of Raven’s designer bags. This old piece of scrap without

significant monetary value meant more to Raven than anything else I could give her.

My grandmother's ring belonged to Tessa's family. The ring could only be inherited by a blood relative or sold to someone else in the family because of its unique history.

My grandparents were two star-crossed lovers from opposite sides of the track. Society was against their union, but in the end, love prevailed.

Though my grandfather went on to become a wealthy man, at that time, he was a lowly worker who slaved every day for a year to save for this ring; a one-carat solitaire diamond.

When Raven discovered the love story behind it, the look in her eyes was something I'd never forget. It was that faint heart of hers, always a sucker for romance. Raven used to salivate after this ring, though she knew it wouldn't pass down to her.

I was twenty-one when I procured the ring. At that time, the ring belonged to my uncle, a sworn bachelor with no interest in settling down. I bought it from him after coming into my trust fund. The family estate lawyer had to oversee the transaction, so I couldn't make the purchase without the entire family finding out. With a detached approach, I guaranteed that substantiating this ring meant preserving an heirloom for my siblings' future spouses.

In reality, this ring was destined for Raven. The story behind it reminded me of our own. And to Raven, this ring represented true love. So, I could only give her this ring because that's what I felt for her—True love.

I had owned this piece of jewelry for more than six years. It had been weighing me down for so long that I needed this moment to be a little better than the one we just had.

"I'm trying to be romantic," I scolded her. Raven liked romance, so it was a feat I had been attempting to accomplish. However, I didn't always succeed. "Now, be a lady and stick out your finger so we can get properly engaged."

Raven gave me her middle finger. “Is that lady-like enough for you?”

Getting a high from Raven’s reactions would never subside for me. “Raven,” I warned.

“You said to stick out my finger,” she said easily.

“Stop being an asshole. Now, give me your hand and give me a fucking answer. My knee is starting to hurt.”

“You are not supposed to call me an asshole while asking my hand in marriage.”

“This is the worst proposal in history.”

“You are one to talk. You called me an asshole.”

“I meant to say gorgeous.”

Despite herself, Raven displayed a full set of teeth, unable to hide her grin or the blush creeping up on her face.

“How about I start again?” I suggested gently.

Raven smiled and nodded enthusiastically.

“Raven Beckett, I have loved you for so long that I can’t remember a time before you. I can’t spend another minute without you being my wife. Make me the happiest man on earth. Marry me.” It was supposed to be a question but came out as a command, especially as I grabbed her hand before she could respond. I barely slid the ring onto her finger before Raven jumped onto my lap.

In between kisses, she managed to say, “Yes,” while Mr. Whiskers distractedly walked back to the bathroom, presumably to find his crate and return to his slumber.

Raven abruptly stopped kissing me, tearing herself out of my grasp.

“Rave?”

Wordlessly, Raven stood to her full length as I did the same. With reverence and awe, I watched her slip out of her white dress, a premonition of what was to come. My eyes followed the lines of her panties and bra. I didn't get to admire the visual for long before Raven undid her bra and peeled her underwear down, letting it pool around her ankles. An utterly naked Raven took my hand to direct me to the office chair.

"Rave?" I inquired again while forcing my hands to remain on my side. Aphrodite herself had graced the earth with her presence. So, it was best not to break this trance.

Raven signaled for me to sit on the chair while she hopped on the desk, shoving the paperwork off to clear a space. Her feet firmly rested on either side of my thighs on the cushion of the chair. Raven grabbed my face with both hands and slowly pulled me between her legs. As I leaned forward, she leaned back until she was lying flat on my desk.

Raven

I clasped his face with both hands and held him between my thighs. Milo appeared to be my willing complicit. His hands slid up my thighs to cup my ass, reminding me of his complete possession.

My hands stayed firmly on his cheeks, his mouth parallel to my pussy. He moved his mouth lower, eyes locked on me. It was at such a glacial speed I wanted to thrust up until his tongue was on me, and I was writhing underneath him, but Milo only blew on my heated sex.

"Milo," I pleaded with a look of pure desperation.

A deviation in our role persisted over the last few weeks. We inadvertently found ourselves leading with each other's love languages.

After our move back to New York, Milo initially led with superficial gestures to fill my life with romance—flowers, jewelry, and designer purses. It was that ‘bougieness’ in him. While those efforts persisted, he finally understood the simple gestures made me fall in love with him more.

On the days I went into my shop, Milo made me lunch and even included a lunch note, which I dutifully collected. Since the unfortunate kitchen incident of 2020 burnt down all the notes Milo had given me, he got me a new box to fill with fresh mementos.

There were days when I tackled Milo before he stepped foot inside our home. However, despite being the aggressor, Milo refused to let me set the pace.

Without touching me, Milo continued blowing on my pussy from top to bottom. When I tried to thrust my hip up to get him where I needed him, he pinched my sides, holding me down on the table with a firm grasp on my hips.

Frustration rippled through me. “You are driving me crazy.” I wiggled for contact, agonizing over my need for friction. My need for him.

Milo denied me, teasing me with only his hot breath. No matter what demands I made, he played with me and used my body as he saw fit, though the pure carnal look in his eyes promised to make it so good I’d forget this small act of cruelty. I was dripping, and all he had done to answer the call was blow on my pussy to soothe it.

My hands were now in his hair, desperately tugging at them. He finally placed a small kiss on my lips. I immediately moaned from the contact, hoping it’d never end.

I hissed when he nipped with his teeth in between the gentle kisses. It was a mixture of fire and ice. His teeth were setting me on fire, while his lips were cooling me down.

“Tell me what you want,” he murmured, placing more small kisses.

Breathlessly, I raised my head to look at him. “I want your tongue on my clit.”

I had barely said the words when Milo latched onto my thighs, and his tongue drew a path from my clit to my opening.

“Oh, God,” I blew out a long breath of relief at the overpowering sensation. I ground my pussy on his tongue, holding onto his hair for support. With shaky breaths and trembling legs, my body writhed wildly under him.

“What else?” he mumbled.

“Lick me harder, Milo. Please. I’m so close.”

My desperate pleas set him off. His growl was low but no less threatening, teeth grazing as he sucked before pressing his tongue to grind against my clit.

My peak was aching close, and I clawed his arms to get me to the finish line.

“Fuuuck...”

Two unexpected fingers invaded, curling to hit my G-spot simultaneously as his tongue swiped with excruciating force, lapping at me so menacingly that it was almost painful. I barely managed to muffle the earth-shattering scream. My body convulsed, my vision hazy, with tears streaming down my cheeks.

Droplets of wet sensation ran down my ass cheeks, his cocky look confirming the wet pool gathering underneath was my doing. Milo licked up every bit of it, dragging his tongue down to my ass cheeks to keep at it while his fingers stayed locked inside, and his thumb rubbed my clit. His predatory noises only elongated my high.

I was still softly moaning under my breath when Milo’s fingers disappeared, and his cock slammed into me. Once more, my screams were muted, this time by Milo’s lips—the salty taste reminding me of where his mouth was only moments ago. He smacked inside my throbbing pussy repeatedly, making me spasm every time he hit my swollen cunt.

“Fuck... oh, fuck. Baby, your pussy feels amazing.” Milo groaned like a wild animal.

A silent cry fell out of my parted lips. Milo’s arm slid underneath my waist as he leaned in, his other hooking under my right knee to lift it and shoved deep enough inside to make me cramp.

My body trembled under him while my head was knocked back. A pair of lips latched onto my neck as Milo growled against my skin, his cock pulsing inside me. Milo kept pumping his hips until he was spent and worn out and until my eyes were rolling to the back of my head.

We both crumpled together on the table, feeling disheveled.

Neither of us could move even if we wanted to, which was alright because there was nowhere in this world I’d rather be than in his secure embrace.

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CHAPTER 10



Raven

I POKED MY HEAD OUT OF THE BRIDAL ROOM WINDOW.

Nothing to report. No one to report.

“Expecting someone else?”

I jumped at the voice of my maid of honor.

“No, babe,” I gave Mia a big smile. Turning back, I made my way to the center of the room and the big three-way mirror.

“Step on the riser, Raven,” Mom demanded.

Mom was my bridal gown designer. I was the worst client she’d had. Impatient. Restless. I stood on the step as she fussed with my over-the-top dress.

Shockingly, it wasn’t Milo’s bougie ass who wanted the lavish dress, the pricey flowers, and the venue. We waited so long for this day that elopement felt wrong.

“Here,” Mia handed me an iced coffee, and Mom shrieked.

“You!” She yelled. “Who gives the bride dark-colored drinks before the wedding?”

Mia and I burst out laughing, though she retracted the iced coffee. Bummer.

“Do you want to practice your vows?” Mia asked while finishing my makeup.

“No, I practiced saying them last night.”

Mia turned to me and raised an eyebrow. “That’s not what my brother said.”

My mouth dropped open. “Milo spied on me?”

Mia only smiled mysteriously and shrugged.

“Ugh. You Sinclairs are always so infuriating.”

“Careful now, sis,” Mia sang. “You’re about to become one in thirty minutes.”

Jon, our photographer, took a few candid shots of me rolling my eyes at Mia while Theresa fussed with my dress. He also took shots of Janeen, my other bridesmaid, putting on my veil while Mia put on the finishing touches of my makeup.

“You look so beautiful,” Mia said with wide, teary eyes.

“You do,” Mom joined in with the tears, too.

“Okay, people, showtime!” our wedding planner, Alex, announced as he entered the room. He snapped his fingers at everyone, indicating they needed to line up downstairs.

Alex was by far my favorite vendor for our wedding. At our first meeting, he made an inappropriate joke about acting like the stereotypical gay planner to add credibility in front of the high-society women of New York. I hired him on the spot. His flair and inappropriate humor were a needed distraction during the high stress of planning.

Alex's gaze landed on me. "Look at you. You are a vision. If I weren't gay, I'd ask you to come around back for a quickie before you walk down the aisle."

Yup. Besides my groom, Alex was my favorite thing about this wedding. "There is still time," I suggested though I was pretty sure Milo would kill Alex, gay or otherwise.

Alex waved his hand. "I'll pencil in a quickie with the bride after the first course," he offered as I burst out laughing. "So, you ready, bride?"

I gave him a quick nod. As we walked downstairs together, I found Janeen and Mia lined up, ready to walk out. Peeking out, I saw my parents walking hand in hand and taking their seats. Given our past, having my dad walk me down the aisle felt phony. Honestly, there was only one person I would have bestowed that role with, but I was walking down the aisle alone in his absence.

At a distance, I noted my groom and the officiant standing at the altar. All other guests were seated as well. I heard the ceremony music and the clicks of the camera. Once the bridesmaids and groomsmen took their positions, everyone turned to look where I was supposed to pop out. Alex cued the music change for the bride's entrance song. My legs moved me forward when the double doors opened, only to have a surprise guest waiting for me on the other side.

"Reid."



Milo

I glared at the double doors for Raven's entrance.

It hadn't been thirty seconds since the wedding party walked in. I was just eager to marry the woman.

The planning process for this wedding took a few months. In typical Raven fashion, she created spreadsheets for each vendor category related to this wedding: cake, catering, decor, florals, lighting, DJ, photographer, videographer, officiant, ceremony music, and favors, along with so many other details. Everything about our wedding excited her, and it filled my ego.

Raven would wake up in the middle of the night to sneak into our guest room, where she hid the wedding dress. In the beginning, I was unsure of her actions. I followed her to find her trying on her wedding dress, twirling around giddily in front of the mirror.

I didn't know Raven could twirl.

So, instead of forcing her to marry me the next day after proposing (my original plan), I got on board. It wasn't about the wedding; it was about us. Raven wanted to celebrate us, all the progress we had made, and all the hard work we put in daily to make our relationship work. We deserved every meticulously picked-out floral arrangement, the stupid six-tower cake, the string quartet, and even the stuffy venue.

Now that we were at the home stretch, bouts of impatience were sporadically trickling through every moment closer to marrying her.

My eyes remained glued to the double doors of the mansion. Raven's bridal suite was in the giant villa of this private beach. She was supposed to make the three-minute walk from the villa to the oceanfront altar with the sunset backdrop.

My parents and Theressa sat in the front row, already in tears. Behind them were rows of chairs containing New York's finest.

Once upon a time, this society would have looked down on our union. The gossip hadn't been entirely eradicated. Through the grapevines, Raven and I still heard people snickering about our past relations with one another.

It was a good thing we stopped caring about external factors. At least everyone here today was our well-wisher. My groomsmen were lined up on

my side. Janet and Mia were standing on Raven's side and already blubbing.

There was one other surprise guest in attendance, my wedding gift to Raven.

My relationship with Reid remained somewhat strained. However, I checked in with him frequently. The post-op was going well, but the everlasting fear of relapse or his body rejecting the liver would always remain in the back of my mind.

Out of respect for my feelings, Raven distanced herself from Reid, forgoing a simple discussion of Reid's attendance at our wedding. Given his feelings and my out-of-control jealousy of their bond, perhaps she assumed it'd be inappropriate.

But I knew Raven. She always hoped for Reid to walk her down the aisle. I wanted today to be perfect for her. So, I bit down on my jealousy and asked Reid, who was equally hesitant about attending our wedding.

While Reid gave us his blessing, it was still impossible to watch the woman you loved marry another man. I couldn't have done it. Luckily for us, Reid was a better man.

In the end, Reid came through, mumbling he was leaving right after the ceremony. It was more than I expected.

Finally, the music changed, and I saw Raven and Reid's heads poking out in the distance. As the wedding guests stood for the bride, I almost wanted to punch them all in the face for blocking my view of Raven.

Unable to see the progress of their walk but determining enough time had lapsed, I tapped my foot restlessly. Did they make a goddamn pit stop for fast food? Or did I make a mistake inviting Reid to this wedding?

As I was about to charge down the aisle, Raven came into view. As usual, I saw her dark hair flying everywhere, nestled under her long veil.

My breath was caught in my lungs, and I reminded myself to exhale.

Raven looked like a goddess with her veil dragging behind her lacey dress. My wildest fantasy was so close that it bypassed my jealousy of Reid.

While my ever-consuming jealousy never descended, Raven had provided me with the necessary assurance to withstand this moment. Raven and I remained a paradox, even as we stood here today. For years, our families were a hindrance in our story, but if it weren't for Reid or Mia, we would have never successfully solved our most vital issues. Ultimately, the same family who acted as an obstacle was the reason for our union. Our circumstances continued to astonish me.

In every way, it was meant to be Raven and Reid at the end. They were made for one another. Fated to be together. Best friends with everything in common.

On the other hand, every obstacle stood in the way for Raven and me. Societal issues. Differences. Our demons. The stars were aligned against us.

We fought it all to change our destiny. We moved mountains until finding ourselves at this very moment.

Our love prevailed, defying all odds, fate, prophecies, and the stars themselves.

The only impediment to sealing our destiny now lies in the distance between us. Only a few more steps, I reminded myself.

I watched the two people walking down the aisle. I mentally willed Raven and Reid to walk faster, but they continued at a snail-like pace. Unable to wait any longer, I took long strides and met them one-third down the altar to grab my bride.

"It would have taken ten more seconds, asshole," Reid muttered.

"Good to see you, too, bro." I waved him off, unable to tear my eyes away from Raven. Raven flushed as the guests simultaneously snickered at my display.

Reid rolled his eyes before turning to Raven.

Reid and Raven shared a knowing look. Even now, I couldn't read their exchanges, but I knew they were telepathically speaking to one another. I let it happen because, though I couldn't understand their nonverbal conversation, I knew this much—they were saying goodbye.

With a final nod, Reid pecked Raven on the cheek, whose eyes were now downcast. Placing Raven's hand in mine, Reid shook my other hand firmly.

Before Reid could retract his hand or move toward one of the guest chairs, I blurted out, "Stand on my side." Reid paused, so I added, "Please."

With a curt nod, Reid walked to my side to stand closest to me. I left the position of my Best Man open for this reason.

"Did you do this?" Raven leaned over to ask as I led her to the altar.

"I didn't do anything," I replied, refusing to acknowledge the sanctioning of their bond.

Raven handed her bouquet to Mia and turned to me with a knowing smile on her face. "Well, thank you for doing nothing," she whispered.

Dad was our officiant. He started with a long story about the meaning of marriage. Neither of us wanted religion incorporated into the wedding, but Dad insisted until we caved. I still glared at him to move it along.

Raven gave me the eye when she noticed the glare directed at our officiant. She was mentally reprimanding me though I was barely holding on.

When Dad asked us to exchange our vows, Raven went first. Mia handed her some index cards, which presumably had her vows written on them.

"Milo," Raven started. "It took me a little longer—"

That's as far as Raven got before she choked. Two lone tears fell down her cheeks, and I knew she felt everything I was feeling. We had both waited so long for this moment. For a while, we never thought we'd be standing here.

I reached over to kiss her. "It's okay, baby."

“It’s not time to kiss yet,” Dad interrupted, earning him another glare. I kissed her again for good measure. When Dad protested, I shoved him back lightly with a hand on his stomach.

She tried again. “Milo, it took—” Raven didn’t make it as far as the last time before the emotions crept back up.

“I can go first,” I gently offered.

Raven sighed in relief and mouthed, “Thank you.”

I’d barely read my vows before I was hit with the same wave. “Rave…”

Nope. Couldn’t do it either. My voice was caught in my throat.

I never thought of myself as an emotional man, but no one could understand the process we went through to share this moment. More than ten years of loving the same woman, and it took me this long to marry her.

It was heartbreaking yet the victory of an epic love story.

“Are you guys okay?” Dad asked, looking between us.

Raven and I exchanged a look, simultaneously coming to the same conclusion.

I turned to our guests. “Sorry guys, we are a bit emotional today. We are going to privately exchange our vows.”

Everyone looked around in surprise. I ignored the hushed murmurs from our guests and handed my index cards over to Raven as she gave me hers in return.

We read each other’s vows. As I read Raven’s, I realized she never intended to exchange them publicly.

*Milo,
It took me a little longer to get there, but the moment
I did, I got pulled into the darkest corner of the ocean
with the force of your love. And that’s exactly where I*

plan to stay for the rest of my life because I rather drown with you than be alive without you.

With that thought in mind, I want to promise a few things today.

First, I promise never to touch a stove without your supervision.

Second, I promise to always keep my singing to a minimum.

And last, I promise to love you until my dying breath, no matter what.

Having said that, I need you to know this is a one-way street. You are never allowed to change your mind, either. And if you try to leave me again, I'll chop off your balls.

If my love is too crazy for you, I'll give you this one and only pass to make a run for it.

Otherwise, we're in it for infinity.

I gaped at Raven for a full shell-shocked second.

She said the only thing someone could say for our kind of love. Crazy as it may be, she told me exactly what I needed to hear from her today.

I had no idea what happened next. I couldn't concentrate. I was lost to the words Raven wrote, the promises she had made, and the beautiful girl who stumped me repeatedly.

"We have now come to the words that will take the Bride and Groom across the threshold from being engaged to married," I barely heard Dad's booming voice. "A marriage, as most of us understand, is a voluntary and full commitment. It is made in the deepest sense to the exclusion of all others and is entered into with the desire and hope it will last for life."

Dad signaled for the rings. "Please take out your wedding rings and hold them to each other's fingers. When asked, please respond by saying, I do,

and place the rings.”

Robotically, I did as I was told and slid the wedding ring onto her finger.

“Do you take Raven as your lawfully wedded wife from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish? Do you promise to love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others till death do you part?”

“I do. With this ring, I take you as my wife for as long as I shall live.”

Dad turned his head to Raven next. “And do you take Milo as your lawfully wedded husband from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish? Do you promise to love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, in sickness and in health, forsaking all others till death do you part?”

“I do. With this ring, I take you as my husband for as long as I shall live.”

“With those words and by the authority vested in me, I pronounce you husband and wife. You may now kiss the bride.”

I was still oblivious to the world. I didn’t blink, not wanting to look away from Raven in this surreal moment. What if I blinked and she faded away?

Suddenly, Raven lunged at me, slamming her lips onto mine. Dad must have finally sanctioned kissing the bride, but I was too mesmerized. Raven saw I missed the memo, and like my forever partner, she picked up the slack where I missed the mark.

I grabbed her at lightning speed, not caring about mauling her in front of a live audience. Dad was the first to poke me, which meant we were becoming semi-inappropriate in public.

We finally pulled back, feeling breathless. Out of the corner of my eyes, I watched Reid slip away casually, not wanting any more display of this show. I was already aware he’d make himself scarce in our lives as time passed. However, I couldn’t focus on what was to come.

For now, I could only focus on this girl in front of me. Resting my forehead against hers, we stared at each other without another word.

And it was perfect in every way.

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BONUS CHAPTER



Raven

Rubbing my hands together to stiffen the rising panic, I paced back and forth the length of our apartment. A delicious four-course dinner was set on the table (not my cooking) that supposedly smelled amazing, though it made me want to hurl.

The rattled nerves made no sense. Milo would be ecstatic over the news, but the little knots in my stomach might as well have screamed otherwise. Perhaps it was because wives and husbands should have these conversations in private. The luxury wasn't available to me.

Milo had a week-long project in Chicago. He initially persisted in taking me along, but I was too far behind at work. Grudgingly, he went alone and was due to return the morning of Christmas Eve.

But he wasn't home yet, having missed his earlier flight. It put a damper on both spirits as the first time we'd see each other all week was with our families. They were coming over for a Christmas Eve dinner, making the knots in my stomach unbearable.

It took a monumental effort not to blab to Milo over the phone when I found out, settling to speak with him privately before our families arrived.

Twisting my hands together, I looked over at the clock. Maybe there was still a chance he'd arrive home before they did.

The buzzing intercom jarred me out of it. I bolted to the white box next to the door and pressed the round button. "Yes."

"Sweetheart, it's us," Mom declared from the other end. "Let us in."

I closed my eyes. All hope of catching Milo alone was officially gone. "Okay, Mom."

I buzzed them up, opening the wooden front door of our apartment. Fluffing down my red knee-length taffeta dress, I steeled my nerves. I had to get through one dinner. How difficult could it be?

Mr. Whiskers barked from his crate, cognizant of the voices coming from the hallway and unhappy about the extra guests. Like Milo, he enjoyed his privacy.

"Birds of a feather," I muttered at him while he tilted his face, feigning ignorance.

I opened the front door when the Sinclair clan and my parents came into view.

"Sweetheart!" Mom exclaimed, raising two hands to my shoulders to air kiss my cheek. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Mom." I stepped back to allow everyone inside, greeting them as they entered.

"Hi, honey." Dad kissed my forehead.

Tessa and Uncle Reese stepped up together. "Merry Christmas," they said in unison.

I repeated their pleasantries instead of making physical contact as both hands were full of wrapped gifts.

"Hey, sis." Mia pecked me on the cheek, also with gifts in hand. "Should these go under the tree?"

“Sure.” I nodded at the overly decorated six foot tree and stopped breathing as the next figure came up behind Mia.

“Merry Christmas,” Reid said in his deep voice, standing tall at the door frame.

A lump was caught in my throat that didn’t want to subside. It had been forever since Reid decided to visit us from the West Coast. For a while, I didn’t think he’d speak to me again, and I was overjoyed to hear he was returning for the holidays.

I took Reid into a hug. He wasn’t one to get lost in trivial, sentimental nonsense, but Reid indulged me.

“Squeezing me a little too tightly, Rave,” Reid finally joked.

“Oh, sorry.” Sheepishly, I smiled and stepped back to let him inside.

Reid crossed the threshold. “How have you been?”

“Good, now that you’re here.” We could maintain distance in lieu of our new relationship as in-laws, but I’d forever see him as my best friend first. I couldn’t help the happiness I felt that he was here.

“How are you?” I held my breath and asked steadily. All I wanted was Reid’s happiness.

He stilled before admitting, “Shockingly good. I think I needed...the change.”

Reid didn’t verbalize it, but we had both come to the same realization. Our previously codependent relationship left us stagnant. Neither of us could move on until we broke it off.

“Are you seeing anyone?” I asked on impulse.

His eyes twinkled as his grin broadened. “Yes, multiple of them.”

I laughed, relieved by his goofiness and the sincerity in his voice. It seemed Reid had truly moved on for the first time in his life. Perhaps all he needed

was not to drink heavily and break this codependent relationship of ours for his chance at happiness.

“West Coast is exactly what I needed,” he added as an afterthought. After all this time, he still had a straight line in my brain.

We silently walked past the foyer to join everyone else in the living room. Mia was propped up on the arm of an oversized chair. Uncle Reese and Tessa were sharing a loveseat as Mom and Dad carried in the tray of drinks I had left in the kitchen. It was premade eggnog mixed with rum. They handed the glasses of eggnog to everyone.

“Raven, where is the bathroom?” Mom asked.

“Down the hallway.” I pointed outside the living room, only to find Reid halfway through the bathroom door. “Why don’t you use the bathroom inside our bedroom instead?” I offered an alternate option to Mom.

They both exited the room to use the facilities while my phone buzzed. I picked it up off the side table and saw Milo’s text.

Milo: In the elevator. Coming up now.

Sighing in relief, I placed my phone back on the side table. “Milo’s here,” I announced to everyone, although they were too distracted by the eggnog.

I ran through the foyer and to the front door, hoping to speak with him privately before the family mauled us. Before I could throw the door open, the knob turned, and Milo walked through the door with a carry-on suitcase in tow.

Nerves forgotten, I smiled at my husband. He wasn’t dressed for the formal occasion in his blue jeans, grey sweater, and black jacket, but he still fitted into every room no matter what. Awestruck by this man, I forgot to speak for a moment.

Milo’s eyes warmed as they landed on mine. Suitcase abandoned by the door, he reached me in two long strides and picked me up with one arm looped around my middle.

“Hey, baby,” he barely muttered before his lips were on mine.

The man always kissed me as if it'd be the last time and didn't want to regret the passion in it. My head reeled as he crushed me to his chest, and I leaned in when Milo made a noise in his throat that sounded like a growl.

I was still in a trance when Milo pulled back upon hearing laughter drifting from the other room. “We have company?”

“Our families are here,” I responded breathlessly. “Christmas dinner, remember?”

“Oh,” he responded somewhat disappointedly before adding, “Guess we should get it over with.”

I nodded, but when Milo lifted an amused eyebrow, I noticed my hands were clutching onto the lapels of his jacket.

“Right.” I let go with an embarrassed smile before remembering I couldn't go through an entire evening without Milo knowing what was on my mind. It'll kill me. “I need a moment alone with you before we go in there.”

He smiled wickedly, misreading the signal. “Sure. Bedroom?”

I smacked his shoulder. “No. More like the kitchen.”

Milo narrowed his eyes suspiciously, but a loud screech came from the living room, jolting us both. “What the hell?” He grabbed my hand as we rushed toward the other room, where our family was gathered in a circle with Mom as the center of attention.

“I'm going to be a grandmother?” Tessa squealed, standing in front of Mom and squeezing her hands in excitement.

My stomach dropped.

“It's too soon,” Dad said, barely noticing our entrance into the living room.

“Enough of your fear of children, John,” Uncle Reese dismissed him, raising a glass of eggnog in his direction. “This is happy news.”

“But she’s too young to have a child,” Dad argued.

“What the hell is going on in here?” Milo burst out, eyes steadfast on Mia.

Uh, oh.

Mia didn’t respond. Instead, she looked at me with a silent inquiry, unsure if I wanted her to take the heat. I’d never do that to Mia, but my heart warmed knowing she was willing to endure her brother’s wrath in case I needed a moment to gather myself.

When I let Mom use my bathroom, I forgot to discard the pregnancy test in the trash can. I couldn’t believe she had waited less than twenty seconds before announcing it to the world.

We wanted children down the road. Milo was barely in his late twenties, and after years of taking care of others, I presumed he might want to enjoy his freedom for a little while longer. I had planned to tell Milo privately so he’d have the luxury of reacting in any way he saw fit without putting up a front for an audience.

However, Mom put a damper on it, and the cat was out of the bag. There wasn’t much else I could do about it. If Milo thought the kid was Mia’s, all hell would break loose.

“Can we talk in private?”

Milo’s gaze swung back to me, only raising his previous suspicions. “Why?”

“Oh, honey,” Mom exclaimed as her eyes landed on me. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

Because this was hardly the way to announce a pregnancy.

Mom’s gaze turned to Milo’s perplexed one. Everyone else also turned to look at him. “He doesn’t know?” she asked, bewildered. “Raven is pregnant. I saw the pregnancy test in the trash can.”

Thanks, Mom.

Milo leaned back. His previous horror of Mia being pregnant was replaced by... happiness. "Rave?" The awe in his voice almost brought tears to my eyes. Happy tears.

I exhaled, barely nodding with a smile, when Milo swooped me into his arms. He said nothing, kissing me over and over on my cheek, head, hair, neck. Everywhere. What else was there to say?

"You are pregnant?" Asked a figure appearing from my right.

"Reid? When did you get into town?" Milo froze, setting me on my feet.

I glanced at Reid looming at the entrance of the living room. Milo frowned, perplexed by his presence. I hadn't mentioned Reid's impromptu decision to come home for the holidays.

My heart was pounding. I braced myself, wondering if the happy mood was about to end when Reid grinned ear-to-ear.

"I'm going to be an uncle?" he asked, awed at the idea.

I lifted both of my hands in the air. "You are going to be an uncle," I repeated.

I almost stumbled when Reid charged at me and picked me up in a bear hug. "You're going to be a great mom, Rave." There was no disdain in Reid's voice. He seemed truly happy and kissed my cheek.

Tears stung my eye, but two hands were already at my waist, separating us. Detangling from Reid's hold, I rolled my eyes at my mega-possessive husband, who already had an arm around my waist.

For once, Reid didn't notice, or perhaps care, about the slight jab as he called out to the room. "The first grandkid."

Everyone hooted and raised their glasses while Milo nuzzled my cheek and summed up his exact emotions over this news with one word. "Thank you."

EPILOGUE

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AN INFINITY WITH YOU - WINTER 2026



Raven

I AM GOING TO MURDER MY HUSBAND.

The archive of women in crime shows who killed their spouses would have a new addition. They'd call it 'A crime of passion' because I was passionately pissed off.

My elbow was leaning against the arm of the chair. With two fingers on my temple, I closed my eyes while dying of mortification.

Milo and I were at the principal's office. Again!

My three-year-old son shouted out a variety of colorful words during preschool. Were it the first time this happened, it would have been a saving grace. I had a potty-mouth kid, and the vibrant words were taught by—drumroll—my darling husband. Milo thought it was hilarious when Damien cursed.

Milo modified his approach to parenthood. Whereas Milo had been disciplinary with Mia and Reid, he was a free spirit with our two children.

"I have a system," Milo liked to assure me.

The system consisted of spoiling our children rotten before eventually redirecting their attention once they were old enough. While I was happy with Milo's insistence on bonding with them over a fun childhood, our son's filthy mouth might cause his suspension from this prestigious school.

We pulled so many strings to enroll him in this hoity-toity preschool. Milo made a considerable donation. They interviewed us and did a home inspection, too.

My preschool research efforts commenced when I found out I was pregnant with Damien. Milo mercilessly mocked my spreadsheets and prayed for our future kid's unborn soul for having a crazy mother.

Sue me for wanting only the best for our children.

Initially, we hoped for a boy and a girl back-to-back to minimize their age gap so they could grow up together. However, Milo refused to try for a second kid after complications during my pregnancy with Damien.

So instead, we adopted a baby girl from Mexico. We loved the idea of giving a home to a child who needed one, and we had strong ties to that country.

Now, we had a three-year-old hellraiser, Damien, who loved to curse, and a two-year-old baby girl, Layla, whom Milo was attempting to turn into a brat.

Damien started preschool a few months ago, and Layla was due to begin next year, which was expensive.

Luckily, we were a two-income household. We weren't mega-millionaires, nor did we chase arbitrary monetary goals. We were successful in our respective careers and were blessed to live a comfortable lifestyle well within our means.

We saved and budgeted to migrate to our building's penthouse, along with hiring a car service with a chauffeur. Milo also insisted on setting up trust funds so our kids could pursue anything their hearts desired without worrying about finances.

Every day, we did enough to give our children their best chances in life. No more. No less.

I still owned my shop and traveled for fashion shows. While Milo didn't freak out anymore when we were out of one another's sight, he did get grumpy about it. I only returned last night after five days away for a fashion show in upstate New York.

As for Milo, he barely traveled anymore, preferring to work from home. He joked about officially becoming my trophy husband. When he traveled, I took off from work to step in and vice versa. We never stifled each other's growth and were partners in every way.

While we were predominantly in one another's corners, there was one matter we failed to see eye to eye on. I was stumped over Milo's contention for Damien's cursing. Even the teachers sympathized with my exasperation with my ridiculous husband.

"This is the third time, Mrs. Sinclair. Your husband has ignored our prior disciplinary warnings. Children are often taught these things at home, and we don't want to expose this behavior to the other children in the classroom," said Mrs. Stick-Up-Her-Ass.

Damien's preschool had an adjacent kindergarten and grade school. My goal was to get him admitted to that kindergarten, but Damien could only attend if he didn't get kicked out of preschool, which was difficult to accomplish considering the principal hated us. We were the youngest parents at this school. As far as she was concerned, we were the stereotypical young party couple unqualified to raise kids.

Currently, we were doing nothing to disprove her theory.

"I'm so sorry," I pleaded. "We are both taking this matter seriously. We don't know where Damien's picking up this behavior, but I assure you he's not learning it at home." I lied because what the hell else was I supposed to say; my husband was insane and thought it was funny our three-year-old child cursed like a sailor?

Milo sat next to me; the attempt to hide his amusement was minuscule at best.

I might dig the sharp end of my Louboutin heel into his biceps after throwing this heavy-ass purse over his head. No man on earth could make me lose my shit like Milo did.

Milo entwined our hands, squeezing them tightly. “What my wife is trying to say is,” he chimed in, “Damien’s picking up this behavior at school.”

With the phoniest smile I could muster, I turned to face the principal. My jaw barely remained shut over Milo’s bold-faced lie.

He was the one to teach our son to drop F-bombs. I heard Milo during the Giants game. “Damien, say fuck you, Patriots.”

Nonetheless, I followed Milo’s cue because Damien was banished to the thinking pod, which I called their holding cell. Students were confined to a sitting lounge to reflect on their actions. Damien hated it. My poor man had been sitting there for thirty minutes.

“Mr. Sinclair!” Mrs. Stick-Up-Her-Ass gasped. “Damien did not learn that word here.”

“You told us Damien started using foul language during finger painting after accidentally spilling paint,” Milo conveyed. “Yet, none of the other parents know of this incident. Is that correct?”

“That’s correct. We wanted to deal with this matter swiftly,” she huffed. “We pulled Damien out of class, so we could speak to you privately without embarrassing him.”

“And did the other children in his vicinity hear Damien?”

“Technically—” she started indignantly, but Milo cut her off.

“You dragged my wife and me out of our busy workday to deal with this matter privately. From where I am standing, this is likely a repeat offense at your school. Children curse under your supervision, and instead of making the parents aware of the incidents, you cover it up. My son is learning curse

words from his fellow students. We never learn about it because you sweep it under the rug.”

“Now, wait a minute, Mr. Sinclair. Before you go around throwing accusations—”

Milo calmly stood from his chair. There was a silent dominance masking his expressions, eyes glowering with menace. I was unsure of the principal’s state of mind as he towered over her with his tall frame.

“You have no problem dipping into my wallet for a new art wing,” he spoke in a self-assured, tranquil voice, which was no less intimidating. “Yet, you don’t make me aware children are swearing at your school. My son is bringing home that stuff. We try to live with good Christian values, and this is what you instill in my kid?”

Milo was un-fucking-believable.

“Mr. Sinclair, I assure you Damien brought this behavior from outside.”

Milo placed both hands on her office desk to lean in. “What exactly are you insinuating? Because Damien’s not learning this from us. Look at my wife’s face. Does she look like she has cursed a day in her life?”

Without missing a beat, I perked up using my best suburban wife’s picture-perfect smile. Milo was preposterous for staging the scene like we were the victims, but if he had the means for Damien’s triumphant prison break, I’d happily play along. I was minutes away from starting a #freeDamien campaign and passing out T-shirts to secure his safe release.

Mrs. Stick-Up-Her-Ass’ eyes darted in my direction. She was wise enough not to contradict Milo by bashing me, irrespective of her personal feelings.

Milo’s mega-protective nature was common knowledge on school grounds. One of the single dads had hit on me at the first social we attended with the other parents. Since that incident, my possessive husband’s reputation preceded him.

“Of course n-not,” she stammered. “We think the world of Mrs. Sinclair. She is the epitome of class. We know she would never—”

“Then are you saying I don’t have any class? I might have to rethink my upcoming donation for someone who doesn’t think I have class.” Milo folded his arms across his chest.

“Of course, we don’t think that.” She jumped up from her chair, ready to make her case. “Mr. Sinclair, I want to apologize. There was a huge oversight on our end. We are sorry to have dragged you out of your busy workday.” Mrs. Stick-Up-Her-Ass’s tirade went on to explain away Damien’s behavior, apologizing to us now instead of reprimanding us.

“Make sure it doesn’t happen again,” Milo directed in an even, cool tone.

I inwardly grimaced at the immorality of blaming her for the byproduct of our actions, all the while counting my blessings so that Damien wouldn’t be further punished.

Mrs. Stick-Up-Her-Ass counseled us on delaying our leave as we were on the verge of Damien’s pick-up time. She exited to fetch Damien from the thinking pod to return him to class, notifying us of her intention to remain with him and personally ‘delivering’ him to us afterward. Her private office was kindly offered up so we could pass the time.

It was the total Milo Sinclair treatment package.

As soon as the door shut behind Mrs. Stick-Up-Her-Ass’ retreating body, I jumped out of my chair. Milo cleverly stood a safe distance away from me.

“Really?” I seethed.

“What’s wrong, baby?” Milo tilted his face with faux perplexity.

“Don’t play dumb. I hate when you do that. Our son’s been waiting in the thinking pod for thirty minutes. Do you know how much Damien hates that? What’s wrong with you? Why do you keep teaching Damien to curse?”

“Oh, that.” Milo burrowed his eyebrows. “As I said, Damien picked it up from the other kids. We should have a meeting with all the parents. Cursing in children is a big problem in our society. Maybe we can start an anonymous cursing program.”

Oh... he thought this was sooo funny. Thought he was a goddamn standup comedian.

Rage-filled steam was evaporating out of every pore in my body. My eyes darted to the closed door. When I was certain of our privacy, I removed one of my heels.

“Baby,” Milo cooed, raising his index finger in warning, “No.”

I threw one shoe at him, but Milo was well-versed in this scene. The asshole was quick to duck before smirking.

Oh, my God. I knew it. Milo got off on this shit.

I had a theory Milo thrived on my out-of-control reactions, especially when he felt neglected of my attention. Every time I went out of town, Milo pulled something like this because the surefire way to push me was through my mama bear mode.

Only two other times in our marriage, I was pissed off enough to do this.

Incident #1 was the day of Damien’s first word.

What was a child’s typical first word? Mama? Dada?

My kid’s first word was shit.

Yup. That was my darling son’s first word after months of endeavors to teach him Mama or Dada. Every time I was at work, Milo encouraged Damien in an alternate direction.

“Damien, say shit.”

Milo repeated the word so frequently our son conceded and said it... in front of our whole family and on camera. I took off my heel and chucked it at Milo.

Incident #2 was on the day of Damien’s baptism.

Initially, we had forgone a baptism. However, our dads were obstinate in saving their grandchild’s eternal soul from hellfire. At long last, we gave in

to appease them.

Damien's baptism did not go as planned.

In the middle of the church and in front of the entire congregation and our conservative dads, Damien yelled out, "Fuck."

If Damien had said it only once, perhaps we would've been exonerated. It would've helped our case if that was the only colorful thing Damien had said.

Our families were horrified. Dad wouldn't speak to me for weeks after the incident. Even mild-mannered Uncle Reese was ticked off, calling us disrespectful. I didn't say a word to Milo on the car ride home, waiting until reaching our condo to hit him with my purse.

Perhaps today would mark the day for Incident #3.

Taking the second shoe in my hand, I prepared to pummel him with it. Milo shook his head at me as I charged forward. Milo grabbed my wrist when I neared, circling his other arm around my waist.

"Let go. I'm furious with you." I thrashed against him.

"Baby," he murmured in my ear. "I missed you."

"Get off me."

"You are cranky because you missed me, too."

Ugh. Of course, he recognized my irritability and the reasons behind it. My husband was familiar with every one of my traits because he knew me.

Today marked day five of our dry spell. It was fair to highlight one factor always played a role in Milo's provocations and the consecutive shoes lodged at him: sex deprivation.

I left for a week-long trip but returned late last night, cutting my trip short because I missed my family so damn much.

Despite Milo tucking them into bed, my munchkins woke up when I stepped inside, and our home was loud within minutes. Their proclamations of missing Mommy twisted my heart. I let them sleep with us last night, a habit Milo loathed because our children had no concept of personal space. They preferred to sprawl out on the bed and top of us while we slept. It was super cute but hardly a comfortable sleeping arrangement for the parents.

Not to mention, it didn't allow for quality husband-wife time.

Milo was still bold enough to try.

Once the kiddos fell asleep, he poked my arm and made the usual head nudge, our signal to sneak off to the guest room for a quickie. The moment we attempted to move, both kids were up. As for this morning, I had to dash out for work and to drop Damien off.

Milo swiftly moved me to the office's corner wall and hefted me up, his fingers digging into my ass. He dropped kisses on my neck, making his intentions clear. "I know something that will make you less mad."

"Are you crazy?" I hissed, shoving his shoulder. "We can't do this here."

"Why not?" Milo asked nonchalantly. "I basically paid for her to redecorate this office. It's only fair I break it in."

"Milo, that principal will definitely expel Damien if she catches us."

"No, she won't," he murmured, swiping his tongue across my neck.

"What if she walks in?" I asked breathlessly, even as my legs wrapped around his waist. Milo's fingers traveled up my pencil skirt to tug it up, bypassing my underwear to slide inside.

When he clamped his teeth down on my neck, my eyes closed, and that was it. That was all it took to break the dam and gather a pool of moisture between my thighs. I was already aching for him throughout the meeting. Angry and aching, all mixed in one. Angry at my peculiar hubby, whose mission in life was to piss me off, and aching while lusting after my husband, who I hadn't properly touched in five days.

“Then I’ll pay for her to build another art wing.” Milo unbuckled his belt in between kissing and licking my neck.

“It’ll be cheaper if we wait until getting home,” I pointed out.

“I can’t wait that long,” he murmured before slamming his lips to mine.

My hands reached inside to pull out his cock and stroke it. As soon as it hardened in my grasp, Milo shoved my hand away, and he was entering me within seconds.

We both moaned at the same time.

Milo held me firmly against the wall with hands on my hips and fucked me by bending his knees slightly. He picked up the pace, and all worries about kids, their education, or what they’d eat for dinner disappeared.

Suddenly, it was only about the two of us, and all I wanted to do was melt into him so we could become one.

We were both sweating and panting from the increased pace. My walls clamped down while Milo vibrated against me, holding off until I got there. As my screams gained steady volume, Milo’s lips came crashing down to swallow my cries. He cursed inside my mouth while finding his release.

For a moment, we stayed locked into one another.

Milo held me with my arms hanging limply around his neck, eventually lowering me down. My legs were still shaking from the orgasm. So, I hung onto him, unsure if I could stand on my own.

We both burst out laughing while fixing our clothes.

“Should we grab our troublemaker and go home?” he asked once we were decent.

I nodded sluggishly.

With a final check, Milo opened the door.

“Why are you so insistent on teaching our son to curse?” I asked plainly, stepping out of the principal’s office.

“I told you, it’s funny, and also because it drives you crazy.”

I knew it. “Why do you try to drive me crazy?”

Milo grinned ear to ear, appearing satisfied with himself. “Because I like being the only person who can drive you crazy.”

I rolled my eyes. Yes, Milo could turn me into a fanatic. He was also the only person to successfully inhibit the trait.

Milo tugged me to his side and kissed my hair. My head fell against his chest, resting for a moment of uninterrupted peace. Sighing in contentment, we patiently waited until finding our hellraiser running toward us.

“Mommy!”

It was customary for Damien to be obsessed with Milo while Layla was drawn to me. In a rare occurrence, Damien was gravitating toward me due to my recent absence. I was soaking up every minute of it before my appeal wore off.

Kneeling to take him into a hug, I covered his face with kisses. “Hi, baby.”

“Stopppp!” Damien squealed with an accusatorial tone, wiping his face. “You embarrass me.” He frowned with disdain.

“Oh, yeah?” I raised an eyebrow and kissed his face while he continued to wipe away my efforts. Screw the day I couldn’t kiss my boy because he was embarrassed by his mother.

On the other hand, Milo and Damien had an understanding. After they exchanged one of their top-secret looks, Milo pulled Damien out of my kissing range. It was a telepathic connection they happened to share, mostly to complain about me.

Dad, Mom is trying to make us lunch.

I’ll stop her, buddy.

Dad, Mom is singing again.

I got it, buddy.

Milo held my right hand while he grabbed Damien by the other to lead us to our car. Fighting the traffic, we made it home in time to release the nanny from Layla's duty.

Within minutes, we were prepping for our usual schedule. Soon, I changed Layla while Milo proceeded to the kitchen to start dinner.

When I trailed him, Milo handed me the dog's leash, indicating Mr. Whiskers needed to go on a walk. Milo still treated me like a hazard whenever the stove was on.

It was ridiculous.

You burn down the kitchen ONCE, and a lifelong rap as an arsonist followed you around without parole in sight.

Grudgingly, I took Mr. Whiskers out for a walk. Milo often redirected me to various alternate activities whenever he made dinner. However, I couldn't chide him for it. I used similar tactics whenever there was a flare-up in Milo's jealousy, which was far from extinct but much more manageable.

The prevalent topic of Milo's jealousy over Reid never dwindled. I realized it wasn't a phase. Milo would forever view our kismet connection as competition. While Reid and I remained on good terms, we established an unspoken understanding about maintaining our distance.

Despite his move to the West Coast, Reid and Milo kept in touch with once-a-month phone calls. Reid video chatted with my children as well, who occasionally made drawings for their uncle.

As for myself, I did nothing more than follow Reid on Instagram. He was living an overall healthy lifestyle. There wasn't evidence of excess in his routine. As always, I tapped my phone open to check if he remained on that wholesome path.

Sure, I was sad to lose my twin. However, Reid and I were mutually cognizant of the hindrances brought on by our friendship. I'd be there if he needed me, but it was impossible to steer my marriage in the right direction with a codependent friendship in tow. While he was happy for us, Reid didn't care to have our marriage shoved in his face. He had moved on with his life.

So, I settled with being on the sideline. Unbeknownst to Reid, I proudly cheered on his accomplishments.

It was bittersweet but ultimately for the best.

Returning from my walk, I found dinner was already set on the table with the kids running toward it. Dinner was another excuse for anarchy in my household.

At some point, Damien started a food fight while his father dearest egged him on. Milo chased Damien around the table while Layla and I watched the boys with aghast bewilderment.

Luckily, my daughter had my temperament. I was truly fortunate on that account because, to maintain harmony, a family could house a maximum of two hot-tempered Sinclairs at a time.

Layla ate her Mac n Cheese in peace, paying no mind to the brute boys at the dinner table. Leaning over, I gave my darling girl the biggest chaste kiss, already ruining the day when mommy's affections would also embarrass her.

Following dinner, we commenced the most daunting part of our day: the night routine. Bath time. Changing time. Storytime. Tucking in.

Even my mild-mannered daughter hated it. Layla had FOMO—fear of missing out. She was certain mommy and daddy liked to party after she hit the hay. Little did my princess know our rocking Friday night plans were to sleep, which was a luxury when you had two little kids.

Fortunately, we did receive the occasional respite.

While Milo and I maintained a slight distance from our parents, we spent one night a month at the brownstone. While we didn't feel comfortable leaving our kids under their care without supervision, our kids basked in the love they received from their grandparents.

Mia was our biggest help when it came to the kids. She was doing her Ph.D. and lived close by. While living the ultimate New York City life with a beautiful apartment and a successful career on the horizon, Mia was still a fantastic aunt to our little ones. She often took them for the whole weekend—a gesture I presently appreciated while listening to poor Milo struggle with Damien. He was extra crabby tonight at the prospect of sleeping.

By the time we crawled into bed, Milo and I were exhausted.

When Damien was first born, we constantly felt like horrible parents. Almost daily, I wept alongside a fussy Damien while Milo was tearing his hair out, convinced we were doing everything wrong. Our irrational fear of our children resenting us, the way we resented our parents, ruled our every instinct.

It was all put to rest once we mingled with other parents. They laughed off our dread, informing us about the commonality of the emotion. Apparently, feeling like you were screwing up your kids came with the territory of being a good parent.

It was true. Our parents never considered the repercussions of their actions, nor did they experience guilt. Milo and I often wondered if we were inadequate parents because we cared so damn much.

With experience, the fear of turning into our parents subsided enough to give ourselves a break. While the bitterness over our upbringing hadn't vanished, the experience navigated us into being parents who were present for their kids' childhood.

The most significant transformation was Milo's parenting style. He wanted to start new instead of repeating the cycle of turning into an authoritarian begrudged by the children. While I didn't approve of teaching Damien curse words, my heart soared that Milo could goof off instead of playing the

role of an isolated leader figure. Knowing he had a backup in me to pick up the pieces, Milo passed the torch to me anytime he needed the break.

We tried to be good parents. If we failed, we dusted it off with a laugh.

“Why did we have kids?” Milo groaned the question phrased once a week.

I laughed over his tuckered attempt at humor. “Shut up. Our children are a gift. Is that any way to talk about a blessing?”

“Our oldest blessing is turning into a real jackass.”

“Milo,” I reprimanded. “He’s not a jackass.”

“Yeah? You want to see the bite marks?”

I winced. Damien had picked up a new biting habit. When he was particularly grouchy, it was best to avoid the facial region.

“Poor baby,” I whispered, rubbing his biceps and brushing small kisses against his temple. “How about you join me for a shower, and I’ll make it up to you? By shower, I mean sex.”

We both laughed because we typically banged in the shower. Our kids had the Sinclair gene of walking into a room without knocking. Not to mention, they frequently insisted on sleeping with us, forcing us to sneak off to the guest room or the shower for our ‘adult time.’

“Hmm. How about we try something kinky and have sex on our marital bed?”

“Mr. Sinclair, you are so naughty tonight.” My arms wrapped around his neck as my legs did the same to his waist. Milo buried his nose in my hair, fumbling with my shorts.

“Baby, how do you always manage to smell so good?”

“I haven’t smelled of anything but spit-up in the last three years.”

“Not true. I have never smelled anything this good.” He pulled back to grace the room with his signature megawatt smile. “And I have never seen

anything so beautiful.”

My heart fluttered and warmed simultaneously. This man... oh, my God. Was it unhealthy to be this obsessed with your own husband? My smoldering, Mr. Perfect-Washboard-Abs husband. Despite all the years together, he gave me butterflies whenever he smiled. I’d shamelessly admit my daydreams about him had more than once caused mishaps in my designs.

As addicted as we physically and emotionally were to one another, having kids changed us. Being a parent meant choosing them over our needs. Between the shuffle of careers and kids, we sometimes took the backseat.

However, when the kids weren’t around... Milo’s hand trailed up my tank top as I grabbed the hem of his shirt to lift it over his head. Milo was kissing my neck when we heard our bedroom door creak open and found our kids walking in hand-in-hand.

Milo cursed under his breath. “Hey buddy, what are you doing out of bed?”

“Mommy, there is a monster in my room,” Damien whined.

Swiftly fixing my clothes, I jumped out of bed to pick up my boy. “Baby, we talked about this. There is no monster. Do you want Mommy to go check?”

Damien threw his arms around my neck. “No. I want to sleep with you.”

Throughout the day, Damien was much too attached to Milo. However, he was a total mama’s boy at night. Milo might disapprove, but it was tough to say no when I was starved for his affections.

It was just as arduous for Milo to say no to Layla. Milo craved her regards, but Layla was generally attached to me at the hip. However, when she was sleep-deprived, she turned into daddy’s little princess, and the only person who could comfort her was Milo.

He loved their special bond as much as I loved mine with Damien.

“Daddy, up,” Layla ran to Milo’s side of the bed and held up her tiny arms.

Milo sighed, fully conscious our children were manipulating us. He picked Layla up as I carried Damien over. Mr. Whiskers charged inside on cue and jumped on the bed.

Instead of being grumpy, Milo laughed. “Why not, Mr. Whiskers? Come join us, too.”

My hysterical laughter ensued at the ludicrous scene on our king-size marital bed comprising very little marital activities. Layla was sprawled out on Milo’s chest, hanging on to his neck. Damien was on my side with a tiny leg flung over my waist. Our Frenchie made a space between the both of us. There was no way for us to move, and I... I. Fucking. Loved. It.

I loved every moment of this hot mess and chaos. It was exhausting. It was disarray. It was... perfect. As I lay on our cramped bed with my drained husband, I found myself more fulfilled than ever.

Don’t get me wrong. All the issues where Milo and I were concerned hadn’t magically vanished. There was no overnight cure for relationship issues. As evident by today’s events, our volatile relationship continued to be tumultuous at times. We had simply adapted, so it didn’t dominate our lives. If one of us spiraled, we counted on the other to pull us back.

Today wasn’t an unusual day; this was our habitual routine. Yet, I was addicted to this chaos. We fought. We loved. We were loud. And it was perfect.

It was perfect simply because it wasn’t. My perfect was when someone held my hand when things weren’t perfect, and I finally had that.

My favorite part of our day? That was yet to come.

I looked over to Milo, who was smirking. Our home was finally quiet. The kids were asleep. Our Frenchie was nuzzling by our side, snoring softly.

Milo tried to move his hand lodged under the dog’s fat butt. I tried to move my arm lodged under my son’s head. We moved at a snail-like pace so as not to wake up the tiny humans on this bed. I wiggled my fingers, itching to

reach him. He mimicked my gesture until his fingers were close enough to grasp mine.

Every night, there were exactly fifteen noiseless minutes in this home before we fell asleep. Those fifteen minutes were just ours. We stared at one another and looked at the life we had built. Taking it in with gratitude, we gave each other this private high-five. After our long journey to reach this point, we were careful never to take it for granted.

Some days, our hearts were full of love. On other days, we were frustrated with our busy lives, which was okay, too. Whichever emotion we experienced, we got through it with our partner in crime. The emotion I was currently experiencing was...

“Happy,” I whispered. “I am so damn happy to be back.”

“I am happier,” he whispered back. “I love you.”

“I love you more.”

“Impossible.” He always gave me the same response.

Milo was in a bolder mood tonight. He raised my hand to transport my knuckles to his lips. I shook my head, signaling against it. These kids were light sleepers, and the shuffling might jolt them. Inadvertently, his hand bumped into Mr. Whiskers’ head. With a jerk, the dog barked at the non-existent intruder who rudely disturbed his sleep.

The yapping woke Damien up, who instantaneously demanded I pick him up.

“Here, give him to me,” Milo moved Layla to reach for Damien.

“No,” Damien said grouchily, “I want Mommy.”

“It’s okay,” I told Milo. “I got it. Don’t move, or Layla will wake up, too.”

“Baby, you barely slept last night. Stay in bed. Come here, buddy,” Milo called for him.

“NO,” Damien shrieked, holding onto me tighter.

The commotion woke up a sleepy Layla, who started crying on cue.

Damnit. Now both of my kids were up.

I wearily picked up Damien to comfort him while Milo did the same with Layla. Damien glowered at Layla as her earth-shattering screams filled the room. Before I could pacify Damien, my potty-mouth hellcat scathed my daughter angrily and yelled his new favorite obscenity.

“FUCK YOU!”



Want a bonus sex scene?
Turn the page to the Afterword to learn how.

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AFTERWORD

Thank you for giving me a chance and reading this series. I'm truly humbled by all the support. Sign up for my [Newsletter](#) for a deleted scene. Also, find me on [Facebook](#) for signed paperbacks, giveaways, and more.

A review for an author is like leaving a tip for your server for a job well done. If you enjoyed Milo & Raven's story, please leave me a review on [Goodreads](#) or [Amazon](#).



Five Fun Facts About This Series

1. Milo was a compilation of my imagination and two real-life people, one of whom was also on the Forbes 30 under 30 list.
2. Raven was initially written as an asexual character.
3. Mia was originally named Mila after Milo, who named her.
4. Reid's character was supposed to die before I changed my mind.
5. Milo and Raven's journey was my therapy following a difficult time at the start of the pandemic. These two characters were the culprits for the worst thing to happen to one another. As they reignited their friendship, Raven managed to find the positive between the negative to fall in love. While nothing was perfect, life was what they chose to make of it. On that note, I wanted to share some of my good news. The hard times had long subsided.

Through the course of one year, I wrote three books and met many friends within the book community. I found something positive, so thank you for that and thank you for reading.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Drethi Anis is a dark, contemporary author and prefers to write anti-heroes. Drethi's stories will always have angst, obsession, and a dark twist. Though toxic love and darkness are major players in her books, romance is still a priority.

This is Drethi Anis' first series. Stay tuned for future releases by signing up for her Newsletter. Connect with the author directly on her [Facebook Group](#), [Instagram](#), or [Linktree](#).



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