



# Recover

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**Description:** Bullies – Saviors – Lovers

It was something I never imagined happening in a million years. Not only did Elliot, Felix, and Leo help me get revenge on my former roommate Vivian, but I now find myself in a relationship with all three of them.

While revenge was sweet, it didn't come without its own consequences. It turns out my best friend Pierre had feelings for me I didn't expect. And when he found out about my new romances, he nearly killed himself. Now I'm off to England to try and mend my relationship with Pierre, but I don't know if we can truly recover.

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Its crazy how much can change in a few days.

Sure, I was still the same old Kathleen Silver: purple locks of hair fading to bleached-gray, still the same old crush, still the same fantasies. Except now, my fantasies had become episodes of déjà vu. Ever since the boys surprised me with the first-class ticket to England, I'd fucked more times in the past couple days than I ever could imagine in any fantasy of mine.

A couple days ago, I never would've thought that I'd be loading up the same duffel bag that had once carried all my belongings to college so that I could go overseas.

It was thrilling.

"Hey, beautiful," I heard a sultry voice from behind me, and my heart immediately started throbbing as I felt Elliot's strong arms wrap themselves around my waist and squeeze me. Letting out a giggle, I dropped what I was doing and collapsed back into his embrace as he began planting kisses along my neck. "You trying to run away?"

"From you? Never," I purred, trying with little effort to push him away. "Seriously though, I need to finish packing."

"I'm not stopping you."

Rolling my eyes, I succumbed to his hold as he began lightly rocking me back and forth, his mouth already halfway down my neck. I let myself indulge in the warmth

his tongue spread across my skin before breaking away.

“I’m serious, Ell,” I said, smiling at the use of the nickname Felix and Leo spoke with such ease. “Make yourself productive. Go back to sleep or something.”

“But I don’t wanna,” Elliot said, pouting as he threw himself onto my bed. He began poking around in the pile of clothes I’d spread out for the trip. “What’s in England, anyway? ‘Cause we have croissants here. I can get you croissants. And baguettes. Whatever you like.”

I snorted, reaching for the list of items I needed to take with me to England. Passport. That was a big one.

“You should’ve paid more attention in global studies,” I said, shaking my head as I sifted around the mess of stuff for my passport. Where the fuck was that thing? “Croissants are French, dumbass.”

All three of the boys had been vying for my time these past few days, but Elliot had insisted on being the last person with whom I was to be in contact with before boarding my flight. That meant staying over for the night ... among other things.

My flight was scheduled to leave in a few hours, but Elliot seemed to be set on distracting me from getting ready every chance he could get. I was starting to think there was a reason for it.

“Besides,” I continued, finally plucking the little blue booklet out of the pile, “wasn’t this your idea? Sending me away to England?”

I looked up to watch his face, expecting to find a stupid smirk or a pair of glittering green eyes. But he was turned onto his side, frowning down into my pillowcase. Letting out a huff I crossed my arms and just looked at him. All of a sudden, I knew

what it must've felt like to be the Lancaster boy's mother, and quickly dropped the stance.

"Stop being weird," I said. "Ell, what's going on?"

Elliot rolled over onto his back, propping up the back of his head with his forearm to look at me. I couldn't help but blush a little every time he gazed at me. I might have been his girl on the outside, but on the inside, I was still just a girl with a crush, bending over backward to not get overwhelmed by it. He knew that he had this effect on me. I wasn't expecting it to go away anytime too soon.

"Well, Felix was the one who pitched the idea," he started slowly. "I approved it."

Approved. Like he was the president of our fucking lives. His superiority complex was something to be reckoned with. God forbid any idea wasn't one of his own.

"I see," I replied, starting to shove my clothes into the suitcase. "Did you want to approve this idea that you didn't come up with?"

"Yeah, of course," he said a little defensively, straightening himself up. "I just ... I don't want you to go, you know? What am I supposed to do?"

I snorted again. You mean, who am I supposed to do? I wanted to correct him, but held back.

"So, you're saying ..." I said, crawling onto the bed, "you'll miss me?"

When I put my hand on his thigh, his eyes immediately lit up. Before I could go any further, Elliot yanked me forward and wrestled me onto the mattress, tickling me. I spasmed under him, laughing like a maniac until I ended up being the one on top, pinning him down.

“Are you going to answer my question?” I asked, raising my eyebrows as I settled down on his lap with a slight, playful wiggle of my hip. “Or are you afraid to?” When he still didn’t answer, I laid my hand on the edge of his pants and picked at the fabric.

“Look who’s being distracting now,” Elliot responded with a goofy smirk. “But I ain’t complaining.”

“No, you’re right,” I said, rolling off of him, a little disappointed with his avoidance of my question. “I need to wrap this up.”

He stayed silent, watching me as I tried shoving a few extra pairs of socks into the side pouch of the duffel to little avail. I wasn’t used to him regarding me in this way—like he actually cared about body language for once, not just my body. Not that that had ever bothered me.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:14 am*

It was just the way he was. I'd waited too long to be picky.

Over the short amount of time I had to get to know him over the past week or so, I'd come to know a different side to Elliot—which included a little more sensitivity to my feelings than he'd had for the past four years. I know, my standards were low. But he was trying.

I just didn't know what I would tell Pierre when he found out. Either way, he was going to find out, and he wouldn't like it. To me, Elliot and his friends had changed—to Pierre, they were still a band of heartless dipshits.

Sure, he wasn't perfect. But neither was I.

“Yes, of course I'm gonna miss you,” Elliot answered, with a breath that sounded like it took more nerves to say that than he'd care to admit. It was as if it killed him to let me know he had feelings for me. Must've been why he projected it onto me all these years.

“And I'll miss you,” I said, the words coming out of my mouth a little rockier than I would've liked. I wasn't used to saying things like this—not to him. “But I still don't understand why you're so antsy about me leaving. It's just for the weekend.”

Putting my hands on my hips, I looked down at him, waiting.

“Is it Pierre?” I said, trying to help him along. He could be so immature for someone who was clever enough to convince every one of his high school teachers to fake his grades. “Are you jealous?”

“Pfft. Jealous? Of Pierre?” He sounded like he was genuinely offended by the notion. “Name one thing that he has that I would be jealous of. A bigger dick?”

I rolled my eyes. “How about being a decent human being?”

That shut him up. Couldn’t lie, I enjoyed putting him in his place, even for something as trivial as mentioning his terrible character. But at the end, it was okay, because his charming personality and killer facial features made up for it. He knew that.

I still kind of hated him for it.

“Thought so,” I said, letting out a long breath as I stepped back from my duffel to scan the room for any last items to bring along. Seemed like I’d gotten everything I needed, not that I had the time to go scrounging around for more hair ties or pads. What I needed was to get the fuck out of here and actually make it to the airport on time.

“You ready?” Elliot said, reading my mind as he grabbed my duffel.

I nodded. He slid off my bed and swung it over his shoulder. When he approached the door, part of me expected him to run off with it, pitch the bag out a window and into the dumpster bin. Something to get me mad, to mess with me, make me regret ever having given him a chance at all.

Even though he and his friends had proven themselves to me these past couple days, it was hard to let go of the memories they’d left in me. It was hard to forget who they had once been.

And who I had once been.

Instead, when he opened the door, something else happened—a series of voices

yelled, “Surprise!” and my eyes landed on Leo and Felix. Right away, Leo put his arm around my shoulder and ushered me out into the hall while Elliot stood off to the side, frowning. Felix reached up his hand to ruffle my hair. I couldn’t help giggling.

“Who invited you two?” Elliot said, obviously unamused. “Get off her. She’s gonna be late for her flight.”

“Look who’s so anxious for me to leave now,” I retorted, reaching up to pinch Leo’s cheeks. For a guy that was six feet tall and ripped to a T, he couldn’t have more of a baby face.

“You’re taking me with you, right, Kat?” Leo asked, tilting his head in an almost pleading puppy-faced look. “Please?”

“I wish,” I said, casting Elliot a side-glance.

I loved seeing him like this—about to boil over in envy. It wasn’t just hot—I wouldn’t lie, it made me feel better about myself, too. Standing up on my tippy-toes, I leaned into Leo’s ear.

“Between you and me,” I whispered, “I’ll miss you the most.”

“And I’ll miss you the most,” I heard Felix’s low, tender voice from behind me. He put his hand on the small of my back as he came around to hand me something. “Here.”

“Oh?” I said, raising my eyebrows at him as he placed a small box into my hand. It was about as light as a birthday card. Couldn’t have been jewelry. “What’s this?”

“Something for your friend,” he said, scratching the back of his head as he stepped back, and put both hands into his front pockets. “Tell him it’s an apology ... of sorts.”



I smiled at him, still trying to process what he said as I opened the lid of the box and peeked inside.

Nestled within a thin layer of fluffy white cotton was a slick, metallic card. On its white surface, engraved in golden letters, were the words, “C’est Bien.”

“It’s a gift card,” Felix explained with a shrug. “My dad owns a few restaurants in London. This is one is probably the best French establishment in the city.”

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Just as I was about to say something in return, I squinted down at the card again—it was for \$300.

“Felix, this ...” Looking up at him, I shook my head, smiling. “You didn’t have to. This is ... too nice.”

Again, he shrugged, as if it weren’t the most gallant gesture a man could make—giving your girl the opportunity to dine with another guy at a posh restaurant? I didn’t think anything could top that.

It was just ... sensitive. He knew how excited I was to see Pierre. Unlike someone else, he was actually happy for me.

“Treat him,” was all Felix said in reply, brown eyes sparkling. “From me to you to him.”

I meant to thank him, maybe even hug him, but I felt Elliot tugging on my arm.

“Let’s go, Silver,” he said, hooking his arm over my shoulders and wheeling me away, just like Leo had done.

“See ya,” I heard Leo call after us, but we were down the hall and around the corner before I could blow the two of them a kiss, or say anything at all.

As soon as we got to the elevator, I broke away from Elliot’s hold, and stepped far away from him, glaring.

“What the fuck is your problem?” I hissed, crossing my arms, the little box nudged under my armpit. “Why can’t I enjoy a moment of happiness? Just once?”

Elliot let out a rough sigh, and punched the elevator button. “Sorry.”

He leaned against the wall, and his eyes dropped to the floor, and stayed there. My duffel was still strapped over his shoulder. Even though I knew it weighed a lot, he didn’t let it show. He wouldn’t let it hit the ground.

Shaking my head, I turned away from him.

I just didn’t get it. How could someone be so chivalrous and such a pain in the ass at the same time?

Maybe that’s just what a relationship was.

I turned back to face him. If he wouldn’t talk, then I would. Someone had to be the bigger person.

“Look,” I said, letting out a short breath. “I know we have sort of a rocky past with Pierre. I know you think he’s in love with me, and that he’s going to try to keep in me in England with him, or something stupid like that.” Stepping closer to him, I lifted my hand up to his face, and took a lock of his dark, glossy hair between my fingertips, twirling it just as he does with mine. “But he’s my friend. And he knows that. He’s not you.”

“No shit, he’s not me,” he muttered. I could tell he was struggling to raise his gaze to mine. “That’s the problem.”

The elevator doors slid open, and a couple kids walked out before we stepped inside. An awkward silence fell over us, and I wanted to snap out of it. He was right, of

course—he wasn't like Pierre. As much as Elliot wanted me to, even though I was trying to move past it, I could never forget what he'd done to me. I loved Pierre because he was my best friend, and Elliot could never compete with that. No one could. What did he expect?

I stepped out into the lobby before Elliot, and led him outside to where his Mustang was parked smack in front of the building as if he owned the place. He tossed my bag into the back seat, and I slid into the passenger seat. As soon as Elliot slid into the driver's seat, he blasted music. Rolling my eyes, I reached for the seatbelt, then paused.

"You know what?" I said, looking at Elliot as he put on his dark Aviators and revved the engine. He didn't hear me. I turned off the music, and turned my body to face him. "You know what," I repeated, "I think I'm just going to get my own ride."

Elliot froze in place, as if he couldn't believe what I said. "What?"

"I said, I'm getting my own ride." With that, I turned back around and pushed the car door open. "Thanks for offering, but I can't deal with this right now."

"Kat." Elliot lifted his hands up. "Deal with what?"

"Your attitude."

I stepped out of the car and slammed the door shut behind me. Of course, this wasn't the goodbye I'd been expecting, but there was no way I could sit in a car with him for forty minutes waiting for him to explode.

He was pissed that I was leaving. It was obvious.

But his attitude wasn't my problem.

Turning back toward the dorm building, I took out my phone to call a taxi and sat down on the concrete steps as the phone rang. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Elliot idle for a few moments before revving the engine and turning out of the circular driveway. Part of me was expecting him to get out of the car and wrestle my ass back into it, but when his car disappeared into the traffic, I felt relief wash through me.

The fact that both Leo and Felix were happy to see me go was more than enough proof I needed to know that it was him, not me.

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I tapped my fingers on the sidewalk as I waited for the car, suddenly way more anxious about missing my flight than I'd been ten minutes ago. A few minutes must've gone by before two cars came rolling into the driveway. I stood up, trying to squint past the windshield glass.

The first rolled right past me, but I made eye contact with the person in the passenger seat. I didn't recognize her at first, but it didn't take much connecting the dots to realize Vivian had dyed her hair brown. I hadn't seen her since the meeting with the Dean.

The second car glided to a stop in front of me and the driver waved. Just as I moved to open the back door, Vivian stepped out of her car.

I pretended to ignore her as I tossed my duffel into the back, but as soon as I closed the door, I kept my gaze glued to her through the window. Just as she walked up the steps, Jason exited the building. They started talking, and Vivian kept throwing glances over her shoulder toward me as my car pulled away.

In the sideview mirror, I caught her throwing up a middle finger.

What a baby.

I didn't know what kind of punishment she was dealing with, but whatever it was, she deserved every minute of it. I couldn't bother taking her glares of revenge too personally.

The ride took about fifteen minutes and fortunately the driver didn't do too much

small-talk. I had too much running through my head already.

Ever since we got rid of Vivian, my life had done a complete 360—my former bullies were now my lovers, I'd found two amazing friends in Tara and Kenny, and I'd acquired a better, stronger version of myself. And now, I was going to see my best friend.

Still, I knew that what goes up, must come down. I couldn't get this thought out of my head. Sooner or later, things wouldn't be so rosy. If high school had taught me anything, it was to be anything but gullible.

I handed the driver a twenty-dollar bill and told him to keep the change. Thanks to Felix, I wouldn't be needing to worry about spending too much these next couple days. If the plane ticket wasn't enough, booking me a hotel room certainly was, and giving me the gift card was just overkill. I never knew that guy could be so ... nice.

The line for security took less time than it was supposed to, so for that again I thanked my senses for telling me to ditch Elliot last minute. When it was my turn to pass through the metal detectors, I did so without an issue—but when I went to pick up my bag, an alarm went off, and felt someone tap me on the shoulder. I turned around to find myself face to face with an officer.

"Excuse me, ma'am," the man said, "but I'm going to need you to come with me."

I furrowed my brow, trying to think of what I could've put in my bag that they were detecting. It wasn't like I had that many things to begin with, let alone things that I shouldn't have.

"Sorry, this is probably a mistake," I said, glancing toward my bag, which sat on a table behind the conveyor belt as it was being pried through by a security guard. "Is it my toothpaste? Maybe I brought too much."

The security guard working through my bag pulled out a brown paper bag, and narrowed his eyes at me. “Weed,” he said, as if to say, This much? Really?

I wanted to ask myself the same thing.

“I ...” I said, and gulped, my mind rifling through the past twenty-four hours for something that would jog my memory. But nothing did. Maybe Elliot threw it in there? Petty revenge for leaving him? No. He wouldn’t do something like that. “I didn’t do that. I mean, that’s not mine ... I swear.”

I gave myself a mental slap in the face. That couldn’t have sounded any dumber.

The officer raised an eyebrow. “Where you headed, miss?”

“London,” I answered quickly, realizing just how scared shitless I was. “I swear, it’s not mine. I don’t know how it got into—”

“Marijuana is illegal in England, missy,” the officer replied, taking the bag from the security guard. “But that’s not the problem here.”

All of a sudden, I remembered.

Two nights ago, Tara had me over in her room, where I took my first—and last, I swore to her—toke. It must’ve been more than that, though, because I faintly remembered allowing her to pack some up for me in order to take along. I put it in my duffel while she was helping me pack.

“Not the problem?” I said absently. “What do you mean?”

“This?”



I turned back to the security guard, and my breath got caught in my throat. With a slow, careful movement, he drew out what appeared to be a knife. No. It was a knife.

And along with it, a piece of paper.

The security guard furrowed his brow as he squinted down to read the paper before handing it to me.

“I hope this isn’t yours, either.”

I took the paper from him, my hand slightly shaking. My eyes glossed over the sentences once, then twice, because I didn’t get the fucking joke.

DO I LOOK FAMILIAR TO YOU?

The note was so vague it could’ve been the title to some bullshitted scholarly paper.

Without realizing what I was doing, I moved my eyes to the knife, still held tight in the security guard’s hand. In the sleek metal face of the blade, I locked eyes with my reflection—a slightly warped, uglier version of myself.

LOOKS AREN’T ALWAYS DECEIVING.

2

I took a step back from the conveyor belt, and bumped into the person passing behind me.

“Sorry,” I gasped, whirling around to find the officer’s hand on my shoulder. He began guiding me away from the line. People were starting to look. Before I knew it, we were in a small area off to the side cordoned off by a folding screen. My head was spinning.

I didn’t understand.

Looks can be deceiving.

Who could’ve written that?

Of course, years of being subjugated to stupid pranks like this made my mind start searching for possible culprits—Elliot, for once, wasn’t one. He got a little pissy just before I left, but he’d hardly touched my duffel. Tara was out of the question. And Vivian ...

She’d do something like this. But how?

I was pretty that sure when I saw her getting out of that car, she was returning from a few days at a rehab clinic. It didn’t make sense. Besides, it seemed out of her range to be making violent threats.

Among everyone I knew, it was outside of anyone's range.

"Sit down here, please," the officer said, pointing to a foldup chair. I did so without hesitation. He turned around to get something. A drug test. That's what this was.

Great.

"I'm sober, I swear," I said, biting down on my tongue as soon as the words slipped out. I swear, my voice whined again through my head. It sounded fucking pathetic—and guilty.

"We don't go looking for your weed, but if we do find it, then we better be safe than sorry," the officer said, as if reading my thoughts. He sounded like he was trying to reassure me more than anything. "We administer drug tests for individuals who seem intoxicated. Earlier today some kid came through, eyes red, puffy. Turned out he just hadn't gotten any sleep for the past two days. Go figure."

I let out a nervous, polite laugh. Sure, that kid's eyes must've been puffy—but I was betting he hadn't had a fucking knife buried in his suitcase.

Go figure.

How did this happen?

"I'm going to ask you to place your finger here, please," the officer said, holding out a thin contraption toward me.

All of a sudden, I felt my phone vibrate. Rather than following his order, my hand lashed toward my pocket. Taking it out, I glanced down at the screen. It was Elliot.

"I'm really sorry," I said, more out of breath than I thought I was, "can I take this?"

It's urgent."

The officer nodded. "Quickly."

I muttered a quiet "Thanks" and pressed the phone to my ear. My pulse had risen over the minutes, and I didn't seem to realize how anxious I'd gotten until the officer brought me aside.

DO I LOOK FAMILIAR TO YOU?

What the fuck did that mean?

Who wrote that note?

"Kat?" his voice whispered from the other end of line. I could've sworn it sounded like he'd been crying, but that image didn't sit right with his next words. "Look. I'm sorry for acting like a bitch, okay? We good?"

I couldn't help rolling my eyes. He'd never change, would he?

"Ell, there's a problem," I said quickly, softly. Waiting a moment, I heard only silence from the other end of the line. "They found some stuff in my bag. I can't really talk right now, but—"

"Wait. You're not on the plane?"

For the third time in what felt like the past hour or so, I froze.

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*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:14 am*

The plane.

Fuck.

“You should’ve been on already. Where are you?”

I didn’t know what to say.

“Ma’am?” The officer raised an eyebrow. “Everything all right?”

There was a silence not only on the other end of the phone, but in my whole head, for what felt like an eternity before Elliot spoke up.

“Fuck it. Give the phone to whoever you’re talking to. I’ll handle this.”

I did so without question. My head as spinning. I couldn’t even concentrate on my own breathing.

LOOKS AREN’T ALWAYS DECEIVING

Was it a threat?

No shit it was a threat.

With a grunt, the officer took the phone out of my hand and placed the drug test back on the table behind him. I watched as he pressed the phone to his ear, and his expression changed from irritation to mild perplexity. He nodded a few times, as if

Elliot were here reading off some lengthy to-do list, and finally handed the phone back to me.

“It’ll be fine,” he said. “My dad has a friend who does private flights from here to England. The officer guy is gonna show you where to go. Just tell them Elliot told you to come to them. I’ll give ‘em a call right now. We’re getting you on a plane no matter what.”

He hung up.

In a slight daze, I lowered the phone from my ear. On the one hand, I was relieved—he’d help me out, everything would be okay. I’d get to see Pierre.

On the other ...

“I’m still going to need to administer this, young lady,” the officer said, letting out a gruff sigh as he held the small contraption out toward me once again. “Tip of your finger here, please.”

I placed my finger on the small rectangular pad, and waited.

“Looks like you’re clean,” the officer said, sounding a little too surprised. I mean, come on. “You can follow me, miss.”

I thanked Elliot silently in my head, wishing I could’ve done so to his face, or at least before he hung up the phone. It was weird. Even when he was mad, or annoyed, or whatever it was he was feeling, he still made somewhat of an effort to be a gentleman. Just like that night when he offered me a ride home from that shitty party. Sure, he could’ve just done it to get into my pants—but I had wanted it then, too.

Whatever.

I shook my head, more at myself than at anything else, as we got into an elevator. We went down a few levels, and the door opened to a garage-like setting. The officer let me out first, and then led me out into the open, where three small jets stood before us. In front of one of them stood a pilot, a wide smile on his face. He reached out his hand toward me as we approached, and the officer left my side.

“Miss Silver,” he said as we shook hands. “I am aware of the situation and am happy to help.”

I had to keep myself from letting out a snort. That knife in my suitcase might as well have been a magic wand—transformed me into a fucking princess in the eyes of everyone but myself.

Half-expecting the pilot to kiss the back of my hand, I pulled it away from him.

“Follow me,” he said, turning around to walk up the short set of steps that had folded down onto the concrete.

We entered the plane, and I was greeted by a smell as if the plane had overdosed on Febreze, and a double row of plump, cream-colored armchairs, TV screens adjacent to the furniture. It seemed like there were just two flight attendants, one who was chatting with the copilot, and the other who was rustling around in the back. Guess I was their sole passenger.

I turned around, looking for the pilot. He was shutting the cabin door.

“Hey, um,” I said, and flinched when he looked up with an almost too high-on-life grin. “Thank you for, uh, helping me out. I hope it’s not disrupting your schedule, or—”

“Please, Miss Silver, it’s a pleasure,” the pilot said, putting his hand on my shoulder to

guide me to a seat, taking my duffel to hoist it up into a carry-on compartment. “Since summer is almost over, it’s the slow season, anyway. We’re happy to pick up business whenever we can. So, for that, I thank you.”



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*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:15 am*

“Right,” I said, trying to mirror his grin as I took my seat beside the window. “You’re welcome.”

It came out sounding more like a question, and I couldn’t help kicking myself in the brain for my awkwardness. Still, I had a right to be a little confused. Sure, Elliot had the connections and talked this guy into letting me on his plane, but Elliot was broke, and it was pretty obvious I wasn’t paying for this—so who was?

“We’ll depart in about fifteen minutes,” the pilot said through the intercom, which was a little unnecessary. “So, buckle up!”

As soon as the intercom crackled off, I whipped out my phone to see if there were any other messages from Elliot. No. Nothing.

King of enigma.

Instead, there was something from an unfamiliar number.

Durham Library, 4th floor study room, 10 PM.

I blinked down at the message, hoping it was just a figment of my imagination, that I really was high on LSD or weed or something and that I was just seeing things.

But I wasn’t.

Settling my head back against the seat, I closed my eyes, rifling through my memory for any clue as to who was doing this. I mean, maybe it was just a joke—Pierre trying

to be spontaneous for once in his life. Taking in a deep breath, I looked down at the message again to decode it a little more thoroughly.

Obviously, whoever wrote this wanted me to meet them at this location. But when? Tonight? Saturday? Sunday?

Rolling my eyes, I put my phone back in my lap and shifted my attention out the window. The jet had started moving, but I hadn't noticed. It was like the wheels were cushioned by clouds, even on the ground, rolling at an even smoother pace than a regular commercial flight already mid-air.

It was crazy, the difference that money could make.

"Please keep your seat belt on, because we're about to take off!" the pilot announced through the intercom, sounding more enthusiastic than he should've, as if he were going to drive the plane in a few loops and dives before we actually flew in the direction of our destination.

The plane turned onto the runway, and just as it began to gear up at full-throttle, my phone pinged. Quickly, I moved to turn it on to airplane mode when I saw that it was a text from Elliot.

Have fun, he'd written. I'll miss you.

He was trying. We were both trying.

I switched my phone off, and tucked it in between my thighs, turning my gaze back toward the window. Outside, the ground began rushing by even though it felt like we were standing still, and the plane lifted off at a slight angle. Everything fell away, and it felt like a real, fresh start. I was leaving and would come back a better person. For a few days, I'd leave everything behind me—Vivian, the boys, my mom, school. I'd

make amends with Pierre and return ready to face whatever I had coming for me.

And whoever I had coming for me.

I'd slept most of the way. Actually, I don't think I've ever had such a solid, deep sleep as I just had thirty thousand-thousand feet in the air. No dreams. Just ... peace.

Once I had left the plane, it took me a good forty minutes to try and find customs in an airport that wasn't as big as I thought it had been. It was the nerves, I guess. But once I had gotten my stuff, it didn't take long for Pierre to spot me.

I was searching for him in the mob of taxi drivers waiting to offer people their services from the airport when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

"Kat," I heard his voice from behind. I turned around, and there he was—looking better than I'd expected. Seemed like he had grown in the past couple months since I saw him—dark hair a little longer than normal, skin tanned and a smile so big I would've kissed him right then and there if it weren't for ...

Well, I wasn't sure.

I threw myself onto him, pulling him in for a long, swaying hug without saying a word. I didn't have to for him to understand—I'm sorry, I don't want to lose you. Don't ever do that again.

I'm here. We're okay.

"Whoa," he said, laughing as he pulled away from me. "I missed you too. Thanks for coming."

Instead of stepping away, he reached up to my face, and gently caressed my cheek as we locked eyes. In that moment, I was breathless.

I am so ready to see you and talk about us.

“Of course,” I said, my eyelids feeling a little heavy despite the ten hours of sleep in my system. More like because of. “How are you?”

“Better than ever,” he said, slowly letting his hand fall to my arm. “Now that you’re here.”

We stood like that for another moment, as if we were some case of unrequited love that happened to stumble across one another by chance in an airport thirty years after a divorce. Something stupid sappy like that, and once the thought crossed my mind, I wrapped my arm around his shoulder and began tugging him along, just as we used to do.

He was Pierre, my friend. That was all.

“I’m hungry as fuck,” I said, remembering the gift card Felix had given me. “Ever been to C’est Bien?”

Pierre tossed me an amused grin. “Hold up, you just got here. How are you making the suggestions?”

We passed through the exit of the airport out into the chilly air. I didn’t answer him. Might as well explain everything over food. I wasn’t sure how much he knew, and I wasn’t sure how much he could take.

Elliot. Felix. Leo. And Pierre.

They didn't exactly mix well.

"A friend told me about it," I said as we reached his rental car, "and gave me a gift card."

Pierre opened the passenger side door for me, and then ran around to the other side. "And which friend would that be?" he asked, sliding in beside me. "C'est Bien is pretty upscale."

"It doesn't matter," I said, smiling at him. We pulled away from the curb and into the fray of airport traffic. "I don't want to talk about him. I want to talk about you."

I had meant the sentiment to be reassuring, but Pierre smirked back at me. "So, your friend's a he?"

Gritting my teeth, I put my attention on the road ahead of us, and found myself looking at the mixture of modern and ancient buildings beyond the highway in the distance. I couldn't believe it. I was actually here, actually in London. My life had completely switched gears over the past few months—I had gone from having the mentality of a fed-up victim to feeling on top of the world. Standing on the roof of the dorm building with Leo was the first time I realized it, but back then, I didn't believe it.

Jet-setting on a plane to one of the classiest cities in the world forced me to.

"Pierre, how are you?" I repeated softly, keeping my eyes on the traffic thinning ahead of us, "Really."

When he didn't answer right away, I turned to look at him, studying his expression. Now it was his turn to keep his eyes glued to the road ahead, as if to pretend I didn't exist, as if I didn't just ask him a very, extremely important question.

“Hey,” I snapped. Pierre tossed me a quick glance, and for the first time since I’ve known him, he actually seemed a little scared. He knew me well enough to know that I had a temper, of course. But I’d never once raised my voice at him. “Fucking say something.”

“I gotta keep my eyes on the road, Kat,” he replied hesitantly.

“That doesn’t mean you can’t tell me how you’re feeling.”

I watched him squirm a bit in his seat as if to find a more comfortable position, and just as it looked like he was about to say something, a car swerved into our lane, missing us by a few inches. Pierre hit the horn a couple times.

“Asshole,” he muttered.

Letting out a sigh, I dropped my head back against the headrest and closed my eyes. Pierre had always been pretty shy when it came to discussing his feelings, thanks to his idiot father and careless mother. This wasn’t the first time I’d have to pry, and every time, trying to get him to open up felt like pulling teeth.

But it was worth it.

“Look,” I said, letting out another huff of air, just to let him know just how much on my tipping point I really was. “You scared me, you know. When I found out what you did ... what you tried to do, I ... I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know what to think.”

I felt my lungs freeze up, and I bit down on my tongue as I felt the prick of tears begin to invade my senses. Both of us knew that we could skirt around the subject all we wanted and still be able to understand exactly what we were saying.

“I didn’t want to think,” I murmured, my thoughts turning to that night sitting with Felix in the lounge. I’ve had a lot of scary moments in my life, moments I wished I could erase from my memory. That was one of them. “I’ve come here because I



wanted to see you. To talk to you. Because I—”

Finally, Pierre turned to look at me. “Because you what?”

“I care about you,” I answered lamely, even though it was true. But it sounded weak compared to what I had wanted to say.

Because I love you.

The car slowed down as we drove off an exit, but I could feel my heartbeat speed up. So much for judging Pierre’s inability to explain his feelings. I could barely do it myself.

We drove in silence for a minute or two, and I took the time to draw in some long, deep breaths. Everything was going to be okay. I had to convince myself of that. I was here with him after all. That had to be a good sign.

A sign that certain things were coming to an end. I’d never let Pierre—or myself—become victims ever again. I was stronger now. Tougher.

I knew how to use my anger to my advantage.

“Here we are,” Pierre said, and I could hear him trying to smile through the tone of his voice. Looking at him, I saw that he was doing just that, as if I hadn’t just tried to bring up his suicide attempt less than twenty minutes after meeting up. I shouldn’t have tried. Should’ve given him more time. “So ... you’re sure you have a gift card?”

“I’m positive,” I replied, but Pierre held a finger up to my lips.

“I didn’t finish asking my question,” he laughed. “Are you sure you have a gift card with enough on it?”

I mirrored the cheeky grin that somehow found its way onto his beautiful, innocent face. “Enough for myself,” I answered, gently taking his hand in my own and lowering it from my face. “Don’t know how much you’re planning to eat.”

Pierre took back his hand from mine and ran it through his hair, laughing. “Doesn’t sound like it’ll be enough.”

“Well, we have the whole weekend to use it,” I said. “So let’s pace ourselves.”

Pierre tossed me a lopsided grin and turned off the engine. “Come on, let’s get dinner. I wanna make sure we have enough time to show you around after.”

Nodding, I unbuckled my seat belt and stepped out of the car to find myself bombarded with the most glamorous array of lights I’d ever seen. The restaurant’s façade resembled the entrance to New York’s Plaza Hotel, with a wide scarlet carpet leading up to a spread of multicolored stained glass and, above that, a row of glowing orbs that were light bulbs.

It was the physical incarnation of a world that was never ours. A world that people like Elliot Lancaster called home for so long.

“Fuck yeah, baby,” Pierre whooped, his skin reflecting the golden light. “Who gave you the gift card, again?”

“It’s a surprise,” I replied a little more absent-mindedly than I intended. But my eyes couldn’t help but spring from one thing to the next—I mean, I was in London. Fucking London. For the first time in my life, I was surrounded by genuine, shiny city life. My mom never had enough money to get us out of Raleigh except for a few camping trips out West. Forget about leaving the country.

She had told me to send her a postcard. My mom was just as excited as I was about

leaving, as if she was the one who was going to visit my best friend and not me. She'd get a postcard and so much more. I was planning to buy a suitcase and drown it with souvenirs—tea biscuits mostly, for my mom to consume.

“Wow,” Pierre said, staring up at the entrance to the restaurant, as if he was the one who had just stepped out of an airplane. “Okay. I’m totally not dressed up for this.”

“Neither am I,” I said, stepping around the car to join him at his side. “Race ya.”

On cue, we both bolted toward the doors, and I let out a wild laugh as we both slammed into the wide plane of glass. A couple had been walking toward the door to make their exit when our bodies collided against the surface of the door, and they jumped back, which only made us laugh harder.

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“Excuse me,” said a gruff voice from behind us

We turned around to find a man dressed up in a tux, who looked more like a bouncer than a doorman. He obviously wasn’t impressed by our little moment of fun, and his Russian accent made those two words sound a little harsher than necessary.

“Please collect yourselves,” he continued, turning a stern eye on Pierre. “Only those who have reservations are allowed in. Name?”

Pierre and I both froze, turning to share a look with each other. I was still trying to wrap my head around the fact that the first voice I heard coming off the plane didn’t belong to a British accent.

But then I remembered what Felix had told me.

“Rosenburg,” I said, the name falling out of my mouth before I realized it. The man tensed up. So did Pierre. I didn’t have to look at him to feel it.

Because I could feel his eyes boring holes into mine.

“Rosenburg?” both the man and Pierre said at once, which probably made us look more suspicious than we needed to.

Letting out a mental sigh, I straightened myself up, and repeated, “Rosenburg, as in Felix Rosenberg.”

Furrowing his brows, the man scrutinized Pierre for what seemed like an eternity

before he stepped past us to hold open the door.

“Follow me,” he said, shoos us into the hall like he was smuggling some castaways aboard a ship. We landed on the other side of the grand, red carpet tripping, and the man breezed past us toward an elevator with broad, bronze doors. He used a key, much like my own dorm key card, to swipe open the doors. Just as tantalizing aromas from the dining room floated into my nostrils, we were ushered into the tight, yet glamorous quarters of the elevator and swept up to God knows where.

“Does he actually think I’m Felix Rosenberg?” Pierre whispered into my ear. I slapped him on the shoulder.

“Shut up,” I muttered, wondering if didn’t care that the security guard or door holder or whoever he was could hear us. The answer was a hard no, of course—Felix looked like he was born and bred under Caribbean sunshine, freckled to perfection, while Pierre only got some sun over the past couple months. A seasonal tan that was obviously temporary.

At least he didn’t seem angry when I mentioned Felix’s name. Guess he was confused more than anything.

The elevator doors slid open to reveal another long, sparkling hallway. The security guy wasted no time and stepped ahead to guide us down to the last door, which looked more like a tall, metallic sculpture more than a door. He knocked on it three times in an even rhythm as if he’d practiced the motion in his head. A voice sounded from within, and the man pushed open the door.

The room was enormous, a clean mixture of sleek modern furniture and Victorian flourishes. Of all things my attention centered on, the large, ornamental fireplace took first prize. A wild orange blaze set the backdrop to a long glass desk where, sitting at it and facing us, was a man who looked like the grown-up version of Felix himself.

“Mr. Rosenberg,” the doorman said, and cleared his throat. I gulped as he looked up.

Fuck. I wasn’t expecting to come face to face with the old man himself.

The doorman walked over to the desk and leaned in toward Mr. Rosenberg, whispering something in his ear, probably explaining our somewhat sketchy situation. When he stepped back, Felix’s father let out an amused, good-natured laugh, and gestured to Pierre.

“Yes, that’s my son, Felix.” He winked at me. “Didn’t I tell you? He’s visiting for the weekend.”

Pierre’s mouth dropped open, and before he could say anything, I grabbed his hand and dragged him back toward the door.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Rosenberg!” I called over my shoulder.

We barreled back toward the elevator holding in our laughter with the strength of a diver holding its breath underwater. When the doors finally closed shut behind us, we collapsed against each other, shrieking in laughter.

“Oh my God,” Pierre gasped, clinging onto my shoulder like he’d drop dead if I weren’t there. “What the fuck just happened?”

Shaking my head, I tried to take in a few deep breaths to steady myself before we went public once again to one of the poshest places in the city. Didn’t work.

Just had to let it out.

I missed this.

“I’ll explain,” was all I could manage, pulling him in for a tight hug just as the doors opened. Clearing my throat, I stepped back out onto the carpet as if I owned the place, as if I’d just earned us the right to dine there. In a way, I had.

I’d earned my way into this world. I wasn’t going to not strut around as if I belonged, even if it was just for a few days.

“Sir?” I said, holding out my arm for Pierre to latch onto. He did as I implied.

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“Ma’am?” he replied, still struggling to hold in some giggles. “Shall we?”

I linked arms with him, and for a moment, it felt like we were kids again, that nothing was wrong or had ever been wrong—we were in a land of make-believe, somewhere better than either of us could imagine.

Thanks, Felix.

Wish I could give him a sloppy kiss on the cheek.

We’d only been seated for forty or so minutes, enjoying our meal, sitting beside each other—but it felt like a lifetime.

We had so much to share. Well, Pierre did. I opted to keep some things to myself, and also decided to ask him about the mysterious text I had gotten just before the plane departed, or about the knife that somehow found its way into my duffel.

It wasn’t necessary. Not now.

“So?” I asked, wagging my eyebrows at the bowlful of oysters on Pierre’s plate. “What do you think?”

“Magnificent,” he said, and slurped up a shell. “I’m making my ancestors proud, that’s for sure.”

I smiled at that, and shoveled a forkful of pasta into my mouth.



“So, Felix, huh?” Pierre said, whipping his napkin from his lap to dab at his lips. We’d managed to skirt around this particular subject so far, but it was inevitable. “Is that just a code word, or was that really his father?”

“No, no,” I said quickly, shaking my head. I’d been trying for the past few minutes to avoid talking about this, about any of what had happened to me over the past week, but Pierre was my best friend, and he could tell when something was up. An awkward air fell around us.

By holding back, I was lying to his face. I had to break the silence.

Pierre sat back in his seat, and I felt his shoe rest itself on my own, as if it were his hand in mine saying, it’s okay. You can tell me.

After sucking in a breath, I took a sip of water from my glass and looked Pierre in the eyes.

But he took the words right out of my mouth before I could try.

“You’re fucking him, aren’t you?”

My mouth fell open a bit, but no words came out. Well, not exactly, I wanted to say. Our eyes seemed to have a silent, raging conversation until Pierre pushed back his chair, as calm as could be. He left the table, and I watched as he made his way through the tables set for two and turned the corner toward the bathrooms.

“Fuck,” I muttered under my breath, pushing back my own chair. I got up and started after him, my mind reeling. How I was supposed to explain myself, defend myself, against whatever he had coming?

I didn’t want to hurt him. But I already had. Continuing to lie would only make things

worse.

Turning the corner, I saw that there was only one bathroom. I tried the glossy door handle to find that it was unlocked. Sucking in a breath, I pushed it open. A sweet fragrance flooded my senses as I entered. Pierre was leaning against the wide ceramic sink, and his eyes flicked up to mine.

I closed the door behind me.

“Pierre, look,” I sighed, but I didn’t get much further before he crashed up against me and pinned me to the door.

Stunned, all I could do was hold my breath. I felt his hand move past my waist, and heard the door lock click behind me. He didn’t move any further, his eyes glued to mine, waiting for my next move.

I didn’t know what to do. My body was in shock.

“Sorry, I—” Pierre said after a moment, stepping back, burying his face in his hands. “Shit. What’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing,” I said, but it sounded almost obligatory, and he uncovered his face to cast me a sad look.

“Don’t act sorry for me, Kat. You don’t have to,” he replied, leaning back against the sink. He put a hand to his temple, and let out a long sigh. “I suck at reading signs, I guess.”

I shook my head, taking a slow step forward, and moved to reach out to his shoulders. Signs. He thought we were flirting at dinner, while I thought we had been acting as we always had—friends. Just friends.

I thought back to that day before the end of our senior year. We were in my mom's apartment, and I had been trying to get Pierre to talk about his feelings. He'd ended up pinning me to that wall just like he pinned me to this door—and did nothing else.

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Just friends.

“About ... Felix,” I said, moving a couple inches closer to him, “it’s nothing serious. I promise.”

“But it’s something,” he said, and I could hear all the hope evaporating from his voice. “I don’t understand. You ... him ... How?”

I gulped. The truth was, Felix wasn’t even the problem, or Leo. Elliot was the real punchline. But I couldn’t bring that up to Pierre. Not now.

Not ever.

“He’s not as bad as he was before,” I tried explaining, and bit my tongue. It sounded so stupid. So fake. “I mean, he goes to Powell, a school nearby. We met at a party,” I continued, lying. “He’s actually kinda nice. He gave me this gift card for the restaurant for you. He wanted me to take you out to dinner.”

“Let me guess,” Pierre answered, his tone dripping with sarcasm. “People change, am I right?”

It sounded cliché, but it was true. That’s exactly what I was trying to get across to him. Of course, I had experienced everything that he had, and Pierre had every right to be suspicious of Felix. I would’ve been, too.

“Kat, here’s the thing,” Pierre continued. “If Felix, that Felix, is being nice to you, it’s because he’s up to something. Didn’t think I’d have to spell that out for you.”

“I know,” I replied tonelessly, my eyes dropping to his hands gripping the edge of the sink. “You’re right.”

At this point, I’d say anything to make him feel better. I’d do anything.

He had every right to feel the way he did.

“But I’m here now,” I murmured, and found my hand moving toward his. All of a sudden, both my palms were travelling up his arms. I didn’t know what made me do it, but in that moment, it just felt ... natural. “Don’t think about Felix. It’s just us.”

I felt my body grow closer to him, and before I knew it, I’d pressed my lips against his.

Keeping myself there, I expected him to lean in. But he remained still, even tense, as I pulled back from him. Now it was my turn to apologize. I was blushing all over.

Nothing that Elliot and his boys had done could make me as embarrassed as kissing my best friend, only for him to not reciprocate.

“I’m sorry,” I breathed, my gaze flitting around the mirror behind him, trying to look everywhere but his face. “I don’t why I—”

I felt Pierre’s lips against mine, his touch soft, timid. After a moment, he pulled me in closer to him, his lips tugging hesitantly on mine. His arms were way stronger than I’d ever imagined they would be, and I felt the mellow ridges of his biceps as he wrapped his arms around my waist. He was warm. Familiar ... right. Before I knew it, our tongues were moving together in a smooth rhythm, as if we’d been doing this since day one, as if we’d been lovers from the start.

Until he started to move his hand up my shirt.

“Pierre,” I breathed, breaking the kiss for a startled moment.

He immediately dropped his hands away from me, holding them up as if he’d been caught guilty of a crime.

“Sorry,” he said. “We can stop if you want.”

“No, it’s just—” I felt myself blushing again at my quick objection to his stopping. “I just wasn’t expecting that. It’s fine. It’s nice,” I said, struggling with the words coming out of my mouth. Just to make sure he got it, I let my hand dance up his side and up to his neck, and began to run the thick dark locks through my fingers. “We can keep going, if you want to.”

He nodded, the gesture so small and heavy as if he knew he was dreaming, and didn’t want to startle himself awake. It was cute. Dipping my head, I let out a little giggle, trying to picture ourselves leaning against the sink of an elaborate restroom in a British restaurant that had us convinced we were in Paris, and wondered if we’d end up regretting this.

But this was minuscule compared to the problems we’d faced together over the past few years. No matter what happened, we could overcome it. Nothing could ever really come between us.

Especially not each other.

Without thinking, I tugged his head forward, and planted my lips on his again, slipping my tongue past his teeth. Pierre leaned into it, and we staggered backward until we collapsed back against the door. I’d known his smell like it was my own, musty like his house with a soft tinge of something sweet, like cinnamon—but as moved my kisses down along his jawline, I caught a whiff of cologne. He’d really come prepared.

Maybe it was all the practice I'd had over the past few days between Elliot and the others, but Pierre seemed caught off guard as my fingers began to toy with his belt buckle. He paused, bringing his back head back from mine.

“Are you sure?” he whispered, more aware of the door than I was, the fact that it was the only thing that separated us from a restaurant full of strangers. Not that I gave a fuck.

Instead of answering, I reached into my pocket and pulled out a condom packet. I had learned to be prepared for anything. Next, I slid my hand around the small of his back and pulled him closer, pressing the condom into his hand.

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Looking into his eyes, I smirked. He knew that look more than anything, and it seemed to reassure him. As he started to undo his belt buckle, I sank down against the door to the floor, spreading my legs just so slightly as I continued to gaze up at him with half-lidded eyes. Maybe it was the dim, rose-colored lighting of the elegant bathroom, or the fact that it was drenched in the scent of some sort of aphrodisiac. Maybe it was just because we hadn't seen each other in months. Maybe I just missed—a little too much, and didn't know how bad it was.

But I wanted to fuck him.

Needed to.

Pierre stripped down his pants, and I couldn't help but blush even stronger at seeing the bulge growing beneath the cloth of his boxers. He was wearing a pair that was patterned with small prints of baseballs. Obviously, he hadn't expected to get laid tonight.

He was too darn adorable.

Pierre must've seen me holding back a laugh, my lips trembling a bit until he knelt down in front of me. I didn't realize that he'd peeled his boxers down all the way and flung them to the floor, because now, he knelt before me with his dick just inches away from the middle of my thighs. I wasn't even undressed myself.

He held out the condom.

“Could you ...” I could see he was about to fall apart if I had to finish the sentence



for him. But I understood, and took it from him.

“This is your first time, huh?” I said, as if I was some sort of seasoned prostitute. In a way, I guess I was. Shaking my head at the thought, I took the condom from him. Pierre snorted.

“And it isn’t yours?”

I froze just as I was about to reach for his cock. What did he mean, is it mine? Pierre seemed to realize what was going through my head, because he reached for my chin, and guided my eyes to his.

“He really is fucking you, isn’t he? You weren’t joking?”

I swallowed, and nodded. There was nothing else to say. Way to ruin the moment wouldn’t have been appropriate.

He let out another snort, as if to say he didn’t care, that he’d proceed to go down on me anyway just because we’ve gotten this far. Instead, he leaned down so that the side of his head was resting against mine. I felt his hand skim the elastic of my sweatpants, and his lips brush against my ear the same way they always did to whisper so many secrets, so many stories. Except this time, it wasn’t just his breath that made my face warm.

“Bet he can’t fuck you like I will,” he purred, guiding my hand to his own cock. His skin was soft, warm. He let out a soft gasp, as if the slightest touch was more than enough pleasure to make him cum right then and there. His words still ran like chills through my mind as I slipped the condom over the head of his cock and began to slowly, painfully, roll it up his shaft.

“Go easy,” I replied, a little too late than I would’ve in our normal bouts of banter.

“Don’t want to give you blue balls, or something.”

He laughed at that, which made me crack a smile in return. It was a joke I had probably made at least a dozen times before. This was the only time it applied in a literal sense.

Once I was done dressing up his dick, I sank back a little more toward the floor and allowed Pierre to yank off my pants. I knew for a fact that my pussy was soaking, ready for a good fight, but Pierre’s eyes widened in surprise as he looked me over.

Out of instinct, I gave him a little slap on the face. “What the fuck are you cowering at?”

He blinked, as I’d snapped him out of some disturbing flashback. Just as he was about to respond, someone knocked on the door. I flinched away from it.

Way to ruin a girl’s moment.

“Hurry up in there, please,” a shrill woman’s voice said. “We’ve been waiting fifteen minutes.”

“Shit,” Pierre said, standing up to grab his pants, his dick still hard and covered as he began stretching his pants back over his legs.

I leaned back against the door, as if I didn’t plan on budging.

“What’re you doing?” I asked innocently, a smirk toying at the corners of my lips.

Pierre paused for a brief moment to give me a deadpan look.

“Leaving.”

I tilted my head to the side, giving him a naïve pout. “Why? They can wait fifteen minutes more, can’t they?”

I was just joking, but Pierre threw me venomous glance over his shoulder as he bent down to pick my clothes from the floor.

“Don’t be stupid. Let’s get out of here.”

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He tossed the clothes at me like I was a laundry basket. I sighed, and picked myself off the floor. This was going to get awkward. “Fine.”

Pierre was usually never like this—flustered, embarrassed. And he had every right to be. But he also didn’t have to be a shitty friend, act like it was my fault, which is exactly what was going through his head. It had to be.

If friends was still what we were.

All my anxiousness faded in an instant when, after pulling on my sweatpants, I looked up to find Pierre crouching down in front of me.

“Get on,” he said, his grin spreading wider. “We’re gonna bust out of here. They won’t even know what they saw.”

Chuckling, I clambered onto Pierre’s back, and he rose to his feet, adjusting me so that his arms hooked under my legs as my own arms clung around his neck. He bent down a bit toward the door, just enough so that I could unlock it.

“Here we go,” Pierre said, and kicked open the door.

We went crashing past the line of people waiting along the wall, laughing like maniacs as Pierre continued sprinting awkwardly through the restaurant toward our table. As soon as we got there, I grabbed my purse, and we dashed toward the exit of the restaurant, not caring that people were looking and pointing, judging. We were free, hot and horny as we burst into the cold night air, and didn’t give a damn.

Thank God we had already paid.

“We’re never coming back here again,” Pierre panted, pulling me close as we entered the flow of traffic on the sidewalk. “That was crazy.”

“It was,” I laughed, also out of breath. “And don’t be a pussy. We have, like, two hundred euros left to spend.”

“You mean pounds?” Pierre said, lifting an eyebrow at me. I laughed at my own stupidity.

“Whatever.”

We kept speed-walking down the wide sidewalk for a few minutes in a comfortable silence, linking arms like a married couple as we breezed past groups of beautiful people beside beautiful buildings—storefronts glowing with premature holiday setups and neon lights written in scripted letters, the smell of perfume and cooked food mingling in the chilled air.

We came to a small park cordoned off from a block of humble residential homes by wrought-iron fencing and rose bushes. We entered the intimate circle of mossy grass and were greeted by a fountain made of white stone, carved into the shape of a wide rose, water streaming between the layers of petals. A ring of blue lights glowed from its base, causing the pool of water to glitter like the ocean I had to fly over to get here.

I felt Pierre shiver beside me, and turned my head to look at him.

“I like to come here sometimes,” he explained. “Or, I used to, until ...”

All of a sudden, there were tears beading at the corners of his eyes, and he reached up

a hand to wipe them away as if he were scared shitless that I might notice.

“Hey,” I said, taking his shoulders in my hands. I turned him to face me. Pierre sniffled, and kept his gaze cast downward. “Until what? Tell me.”

Pulling away from me, he made an attempt to pull himself together as he stuffed his hands into his pockets and forced his eyes back to the fountain. After a moment, he drew in a long breath.

“Until I tried to kill myself.”

His expression went stone cold. It was happening in front of his eyes, in the reflection of the blue water, all over again. I could feel him feel it.

Do I look familiar to you?

The knife. I remembered back during that last week of senior year, the time that Pierre and I had promised to never speak about that incident. That one terrifying incident. That’s what the note was referring to—the knife that Pierre had used. Tried to use. And tried to use again so recently.

It was familiar to me, alright.

But how would whoever had written that note know that? What kind of sick person would taunt me with those memories?

Even though he had gone stoic, my cheeks became slippery with tears as I reached for his hand, slowly intertwining my fingers with his. I stroked the back of his hand with my thumb in small circles, and leaned my head onto his shoulder.

We stayed like that, warm despite the freezing numbness. And I couldn’t be happier.

I heard Pierre snuffle again, and he wrapped his arm around me to pull me back toward the street.

“Come on. Let’s go home.”

## Page 15

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The trip from the park back to the apartment was a blur. Once we'd stepped inside, we had torn our clothes off.

After returning the rental car, we had taken the tube to the edge of the city, and took a cab to Pierre's building. It was a shabby artist's studio a couple miles from the Durham campus, tall leaded windows with heavy red drapes and coffee-colored wooden floors, perfect for Pierre's sensitive style. In spite of the unlit room, it didn't take us much effort to find his bed.

And then, all of a sudden, time slowed down.

"Are you sure?" he asked me as we neared the mattress, even though I was the one climbing on top of him. "I just wanna make sure you're comfortable. You can tell me to stop at any time, and—"

"Shut up, P."

Pinning him down on the bed, my hands massaged his shoulders as my lips tugged at his, eliciting a long moan. At the sound, I lifted my head from his to smirk down at him, and wiggled my waist to settle myself right between his legs.

"Shouldn't I be the one asking if you're sure about this?" I murmured, dipping my head back toward his as if for another kiss. At the last moment, instead of locking lips with him, I created a trail of kisses along his neck and down the center of his chest. "After all, you're the virgin."

He grunted at the comment. "Yeah. No need to remind me."



As I reached the elastic band of his boxers, I paused just a moment to see if he would take advantage of my offer. But he seemed keen to continue, so I started pulling down the fabric. Once they were off completely, I could feel him shudder beneath me.

“You cold?” I giggled, rubbing my hands up and down his arms. “‘Cause I can warm you up.”

“Fuck you,” Pierre giggled even louder, playfully slapping me on the shoulder. “Where’d you learn to say that shit?”

“That line, my friend, was improvised,” I laughed along, my hands gliding over his chest toward his manhood. Until, suddenly, my hands felt something. “Wait.” Squinting through the dim lighting, I noticed the layer of plastic covering Pierre’s dick. Still. “Oh my God. You didn’t take it off?”

“The condom?” Pierre asked, sounding so innocent it made me laugh again. “Shit. I didn’t realize I still had it on.”

“Guess it’s one less step,” I replied, tilting my head so that my long hair fell over one shoulder, and bent forward, my tits dangling over his chest as I positioned myself above him. “Ready?”

“Wait,” he said, suddenly sounding breathless. He scooted up so that his back was against the wall, and then moved aside. “Lie down.”

The command was a little unexpected coming from him—I liked it, and so, I did what I was told. I could feel his excitement as he then copied my own movements, positioning himself above my opening. But, before he went any further, his hand traveled up my side, and soon, took turns caressing each of my breasts. His touch was soft. Rather than squeezing, he rubbed the skin as if he fully aware of their

fragility—the pleasure was for me, and me alone.

“I might have to hire you as my masseuse,” I joked, after letting out a deep sigh.

“Please,” he said, deepening his voice to play along with my cheesy seductive one-liners. He moved his hands to cradle my head, and looked into my eyes. “No need to hire. Being with you is all the compensation I need.”

I let out a laugh, but it was cut short as he lowered his head into the crook of my neck, and entered me. My legs instantly stretched wider out on either side of him. I drew in a sharp breath.

“Thanks for the warning,” I muttered, clutching at his hair. He answered with a moan, and the next stroke smoother, his dick sailing up my pelvis with a wave of tingling warmth.

From then on, no words passed between us.

Pierre’s breath soaked my ear clean as he pounded into me—he was fierce, passionate, filled with love more than lust. We were on his bed which was directly beneath the window. Moonlight cast a spotlight on us, our skin pearly silver as we rocked together beneath the glass.

Where Elliot was rough, Pierre was soft.

Where he was soft, it was pure ecstasy.

His nose buried into the side of my neck, his forearms cradling my head, fingers running through my fading purple locks of hair. My hands traveled up and down his back, stroking his firm shoulders and round buttocks that had never seen the light of day, let alone moonlight. I had never lasted this long before. Each stroke of his cock

was another wave of pleasure, each one stronger than the last, synchronized with my own heartbeat.

I was his first.

And I couldn't help but feel shame.

"You're gorgeous, Kat," he whispered, his lips drifting along the skin between my breasts. "I love you."

Because somewhere, in the back of my heart, I knew he deserved someone better than me.

4

I woke up to the sound of a siren in the distance, the warmth of the sun on my bare back, and the smell of frying batter.

With a stretch, I sat up in Pierre's bed to find him standing a few yards away at the short kitchen countertop. The apartment was small enough that nothing was separated except for the bathroom, which was consisted of half a shower, a low-seated toilet and a tiny sink that was stuffed into the corner of the walls. It was charming.

"You're up early," Pierre said without turning around. I could hear the lightness in his voice, the glee. Reaching for my phone, I saw that it was almost 12 PM.

I let out a snort. "Early?"

"Cut yourself some slack," Pierre replied, flipping a spatula through the air and catching it in his hand. "It's probably the jetlag."

Rubbing my head, I shifted my legs over the edge of the bed. "Yeah, but I feel bad. The day's almost over." I squinted at him, watching as he poured some sort of batter into a frying pan and gave it a little swirl. "What're you ..."

"Crêpes," he exclaimed, turning around to face me for the first time. His smile was bright, eyes brighter. "I got inspired from our dinner."

After pulling on a hoodie, I got up from the bed and wandered over to him, taking my time to run my hands along the minute details engraved into the woodwork of the

cabinetry, and the ridges of the lightly-tearing wallpaper. The place was homey, tender and full of pleasant surprises—just like Pierre.

“Didn’t you used to have a crush on Julia Child when you were a kid?” I asked, draping my arm over his shoulder as I looked down to inspect his work.

“Technically, yes,” Pierre replied a little defensively, casting me a grin. “But that’s only because my crazy French parents were obsessed with her. Hearing her name twice a day for my whole life wasn’t by choice.”

I laughed and left his side to go check my phone. We didn’t have to talk about it, but we both knew that last night was ... something else. It must’ve lived up to his fantasies, because Pierre started humming as he transferred the cooked crêpe to a plate and poured some more batter into the pan.

“Sugar on yours or chocolate?” he asked.

“Chocolate.”

Sitting down on the bed, I smiled at him like a mother marveling over its newborn baby, as if everything he did was perfect and glorious—the way he wiped his hands on the dishtowel and swirled the saucepan in order to melt the bar of chocolate. Up until yesterday I had always seen Pierre in one way, as the kid I became friends with in school. Two loners that were desperate for a gram of company. We had found that in each other, and now, we were finding so much more. He was older now, more mature. Just like I was.

“It must feel good to be here on your own,” I said, looking out the window. “Without your parents.”

“Yeah, it is,” Pierre replied faintly. I waited a moment and then he continued, “I try

not to think about them too much.”

“You’ll have to see them eventually,” I pointed out. “Are you going back for the fall break?”

Pierre paused spreading the chocolate as if to consider the idea, but then shook his head. “Maybe I don’t have to see them. Maybe ... I can just stay here.”

Pulling my gaze away from the view of the street below, I narrowed my eyes at him. “But your scholarship covers your housing. How would you—”

“I’d figure something out,” he replied, waving it off. “I made a few friends who said they’d be willing to take me in whenever school’s out. Plus, I could work to pay them rent.”

It sounded legit, but I knew that Pierre had this tendency to fall in with people who showed him an ounce of kindness—they could run off and drop him whenever they wanted, and Pierre would remain attached and stuck. Growing up, it was the opposite for me. I had deliberately avoided people. Maybe I thought I was just too good for them. At any rate, our social misfortunes kept us glued to one another.

My point? He couldn’t rely on these “friends,” whoever they were.

But I couldn’t just rain on his parade.

“Okay,” I said carefully, nodding as if I agreed with him, and was just considering the logistics. “How did your parents take it when you told them you were coming to England for school?”

“My dad hated the idea. My mom, as usual, didn’t give a fuck.” Pierre brought two plates over to the little round dining table in the center of the room. “But when I

mentioned they wouldn't be paying for any of it, he kinda lightened up. Well, as much as he could."

I got up from the bed and went to take my seat across from Pierre at the table. My stomach let out a little grumble as I looked down at my plate. The crêpe was cooked to a light, golden-brown and dripping with rich dark chocolate. I dug in right away, half-forgetting our conversation until Pierre let out a small chuckle. I looked up from the food to find him smirking at me.

"You're already done?"

I looked back down at my plate to find that I was at my last two bites. "Fuck," I said, astonished at myself. "It was good, I guess."

Pierre smiled and started on his. "Anyway. You think they'll throw a fit if I don't come back for a year?"

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“Uh ...” I wiped my mouth with my napkin. “I don’t know if fit is the right word, but ...” I tried to find the right way to say what was on my mind without being too blunt. “I don’t know. I feel like it’d make them angrier if you didn’t come home than if you did anything to make them angry at home. It’s kind of like saying fuck you.”

“Which is exactly what I want to say,” Pierre said, suddenly all serious. “I mean, what’d they ever do for me? Besides conceiving me, nothing. I’m the one who got into college. I’m the one who did all the work. I have no reason to go back.”

I bit my tongue to hold back any objection. But I couldn’t take it. There was no way he could stay here on his own for this long.

“Where were they?” I asked, my voice almost cracking.

Furrowing his brow, Pierre looked up at me. “Huh?”

“Your friends?” I cocked an eyebrow, leaning toward him so that my elbows rested on the table. “You said you made some good friends here. Where were they?”

“Where were they when?” He was getting irritated. “Kat.”

I waited for a moment, staring into his eyes so hard I could’ve shattered them if they were glass. “You know when.”

Maybe I was trying to test him. To see if how far he’d let me take him—and maybe that was cruel. But if I’d learned anything from the past week, it was to be tough. Thick-skinned and skeptical. Pierre couldn’t be so easily persuaded by the idea that



someone was there for him, especially when they never were to begin with.

If he had made some real friends, they would've helped him. He wouldn't have tried to kill himself.

"Jesus, Kat," Pierre muttered, setting down his silverware. "I've been here for a few months. Cut me some slack."

Maybe I'd gone too far. I didn't realize my hands were curling into fists around my utensils. The thing was, if anything was to get me angry, it'd have to do with Pierre. I couldn't stand to see him sell himself short, even if he didn't know he was.

"You can't count on strangers to be there for you," I murmured, keeping up my eye contact with him. The energy between us began to feel nuclear. "I'm just saying. I want to be honest with you. That's all."

"Well ..." Sitting back in his chair, Pierre let out a long, trembling breath. "What am I supposed to do, then? Go back to spend another week of my life in an abusive household?"

Yeah, he had a point.

Now it was my turn to sigh. I placed the silverware down and flexed my fingers as my eyes wandered around the room.

"You could come stay with me." I raised an eyebrow at him, waiting for his response. "I'd rather you be near me than stay here on your own."

Pierre nodded slowly, as if piecing the idea together in his head, as if it were that complicated. I knew him well enough to know what he was thinking. As long as he didn't have to go home. That was all.

It was either his best friend or some British acquaintances. Sure, I had just offered him the alternative, but he really had no choice.

“Okay,” he replied. “Fine. As long as I don’t have to stay at home.”

I felt a smirk tugging at the corner of my lips, but I replaced it with a grave smile instead, reaching across the table to shake his hand. “Of course. Deal.”

Pierre returned the smile, and let out a breath of relief. Then he clapped his hands together, and pushed back his chair. “You done? Cause I wanna show you around.”

“I could have about ten more of these, but yeah,” I said, sliding the plate toward him. “Dinner stuffed me up, too. Think I’m bloated.”

“Nice.” Pierre took the dishes over to the sink. “I’m thinking we go see Buckingham Palace. We’ll take a cab to the closest tube entrance and it’s pretty much a straight shot from there. Just one transfer.”

“Sounds good,” I said, picking myself up from the table, slightly regretting the way I’d berated Pierre just a few minutes ago for thinking he’d made some real friends. It was kind of shitty thing to do.

But maybe something inside me wanted him to come back home with me. And I’d simply found a way to make it happen.

“Hey,” I heard him say, and felt his hand on my waist as I went back to the bed to find my suitcase. Turning my face, I felt his cheek inches away from mine. “I’m glad you’re here. Thank you.”

Smiling, I laid my hands on his and gave them a little squeeze. “I’m glad you’re here, too.”

That one sentence meant more than it sounded—I'm glad you're here and not dead, I'm glad you're here and not gone, not forgotten, not lost, not defeated.

He knew that and that was all that mattered.

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With that, I broke away from his hold in order to peel my hoodie over my head, and put on some real clothes. I felt his eyes on me, traveling down my bare back as I stepped over to my duffel. Finally, I sensed him shift away to start getting ready himself, hearing the tap water running in the bathroom.

“Hey,” I called, after pulling put a pair of camouflage-patterned cargo pants, I spotted the outfit I wore to Elliot’s party. “You feel like going clubbing or something tonight? I heard there’s some cool places around here. Good music.”

“Uh,” Pierre said between the bristles of his toothbrush. “Actually, I was thinking we could head in early tonight. Maybe tomorrow?”

“But tomorrow night I’m leaving,” I pointed out, turning my neck to look at him. “Why not tonight?”

“No reason,” he replied quickly. “Just thought we’d be a little exhausted. Plus I’d rather us be able to wake up early enough to do something fun before you have to leave.”

Nodding, I turned back to my bag. “Fair enough.”

Suddenly, I remembered something. The text message— Durham Library, 4th floor study room, 10 PM.

Sure, maybe we’d be a little exhausted. But maybe it was a good thing to go sleep early—and maybe it’d give me the chance to do something.

The chance to see what that text was all about.

“How about you give me a tour of the campus?” I said, standing up to stretch the pants over my legs. “We could go before we head into the city, since there’s a tube entrance there.”

“Sure,” Pierre replied, the tone of his voice lightening up. “Good idea.”

Deciding to skip the bra, I pulled on an undershirt and replaced the hoodie back over my shoulders. Looking out the window, I could tell it was going to be a chilly day, so when I couldn’t find any hats or gloves in my own duffel I plucked them out of Pierre’s closet. He wouldn’t mind. Just as I was about to wrap a scarf around my neck, I heard my phone vibrate, and reached for it from the table to see that it was Elliot.

“I need your expert opinion,” Pierre said, walking back into the main room holding two bottles. Hair dye. “Which color should it be?”

Quickly, I declined Elliot’s call. “For who? Me?”

“Me,” Pierre said proudly, and looked down at the bottles. “Am I more, Verdant Green or Lustful Verbena?”

“Oh God,” I laughed. “You’re making that shit up.”

Glancing back at my screen, I saw that Elliot had left a voicemail. I’d listen to it later, in the safety and privacy of a public restroom somewhere. Slipping my phone into my back pocket, I walked over to Pierre and took the bottles from him to read their labels. Then, I reached up to run my fingers through his messy bangs as if I were his hairstylist.

“First of all, you can’t be either one until we bleach your hair. You’re too dark for these colors.”

“I assumed so,” he replied, shrugging. Without warning, he dipped his head down to mine and planted a kiss on my forehead before stepping past me. “We can stop at a store along the way. Let’s go.”

“Yeah,” I said, feeling the guilt start to seep into me as my phone vibrated again in my pocket. “Let’s go.”

The cab ride had been just a quick ten minutes from Pierre's apartment complex to the campus. By the time we had taken a walk around the cafeteria, my stomach was already craving lunch—as if I didn't just have a plate of some of the best crêpes in all of Britain. The smells coming from the kitchen weren't as rich as those in C'est Bien, but they were good enough to warrant me standing in the doorway for a solid two seconds before Pierre had to pull me out of the way.

"Is the food good here, at least?" I asked, trying not to think about how badly I was craving some fish-and-chips.

"I don't really eat here, actually," Pierre replied. "Unless someone's giving me a free meal swipe, I'd rather cook my own stuff."

"Ah." I raised an eyebrow at him. "We'll have to test your cooking skills for lunch, then."

Even though he made it sound like he preferred whipping up his own meals, I knew for a fact that he didn't exactly have a choice. I knew from the price of the most basic meal plan at Freeman that it was way cheaper to cook at home. Once again, I found myself silently thanking Felix for the gift card—maybe it was a little much, but if it meant that Pierre could order in some high-quality French cuisine to tie him over for a few days, then I'd be grateful for it.

Looking around, I noticed how different Durham's atmosphere was from Freeman's. The students here were more stylish, yet seemed more chill, basking in the sunlight

on the lawn and walking slowly along the perimeter rather than rushing from one place to the next. It was like we were in some sort of dream world, a movie set, where everyone was free of the social drama and academic insipidness that plagued the American campuses of so many films and books.

I guessed that was what studying abroad was all about—escaping the old and familiar. In Pierre’s case, the old and toxic. I was proud of him for coming here.

“The library here is amazing,” Pierre said, nodding to the large red-brick, columned building ahead of us. “Kind of reminds me of the one at Columbia. Sometimes I spend, like, four hours in there, just—”

Suddenly, I felt something on my ass—someone.

“I’d smash that,” I heard a deep voice say behind me. I whirled around.

There were two guys. Both were big, tall jocks. It wasn’t hard to make that assumption. The one behind me let out a low whistle, as if seeing my face was the icing on the cake.

Pierre grabbed onto my arm, pulling me toward him. “Did he just—”

“Yeah.” It wasn’t a question. But I shrugged it off, pulling Pierre along. We didn’t have time for this. “It doesn’t matter. Just ignore them.”

“No.”

I looked into Pierre’s eyes for a brief moment, shocked at the tone of his voice. It was almost like he was berating me for wanting to forget about it.

And then I realized why.



“Holy shit, Pierre’s got a girlfriend,” the other guy said, looking me up and down. “What a miracle.”

“Nah, I don’t believe it. How much is he paying you, sweetheart?” The guy who’d grabbed my butt lifted his eyebrows at me. “Ten pounds for every minute you spend with him?”

These two weren’t just some random students who’d happened to be jerks. Pierre knew them. And they knew him, it seemed.

Bullies. That’s what they were.

What a coincidence.

“Hey, Tommy. Derrick.” Pierre said, letting out a nervous laugh as he left my side. I could only stand there with my jaw dropped as he reached out his arm to give them each a bro shake. Then, he turned back to me, and I could practically see the sweat beading at his temples. “This is, uh, Kat.” he explained, as if he didn’t see what just happened to me. “A friend from home.”

“Wait.” I squeezed my eyes shut, and had to bite back a string of filthy swears. I looked back at Pierre and I knew he could tell I was seething. “These are your friends?”

I didn’t even bother keeping my voice down. So what, I embarrassed him. He should’ve been embarrassed. He deserved to be.

I knew exactly what was happening here—because it was exactly the kind of situation I’d avoided getting my own ass into that first week of college.

“We’ll take that as a compliment,” the misogynistic ass-grabber, Tommy, said in

what was now an excruciatingly posh British accent. The grin plastered on his chapped lips was worse than any glossy smirk that Vivian could pull. “Pleasure to meet you, sweetheart.”

Oh my God.

I wanted to vomit at that the sound of that word coming out of his mouth. Sweetheart my ass.

Rather than returning the nicety, I planted myself firmly beside Pierre and crossed my arms, looking between the two guys. They were conventionally attractive, square jaws, tall, typical jock facade. Blonds. I didn’t have to stand there long to convince myself that there was no way in hell that Pierre would ever voluntarily stick around these guys for five minutes, let alone act like they were good friends of his.

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After looking them over, I shot my eyes back at Pierre and waited.

I wouldn't say anything. Not until he acknowledged what happened.

"She's feisty, isn't she," the other guy, Derrick, whispered loudly, holding up a hand to his mouth as he raised his eyebrows at Pierre. "Thought you'd be more of an indie shy-girl type."

The sexism couldn't get any more blatant. I wanted to throw up on Pierre just as badly as I wanted to take the knife that had spawned in my duffel and shove it up these guys' asses.

Pierre must've felt the rage boiling within me because he finally spoke up.

"Don't talk about her like that," he said, no—practically whispered. "She's right in front of you, man. Come on."

Derrick took a step closer to Pierre, hooking his thumbs over his pockets. "What's the matter, P?" he replied, drawing his eyebrows together in mock confusion. "We're just joking around is all."

I watched as Pierre's face started to heat up. He was out of his element, for sure.

And I was in awe.

"That was no joke," he responded flatly. "Don't you dare touch her like that."

“Or else what?” Tommy jumped in, stepping forward beside his fellow crony. But instead of staying there, all of a sudden, I felt his arm loop around my back to pull me in toward him.

That’s when Pierre snapped.

Before I knew what was happening, I heard a sharp smack. Tommy staggered backward with a bloody nose, and his boy Derrick threw himself toward us.

“Bloody hell, man! What the fuck is wrong with you?” Tommy yelled, straightening himself up just in time to see Pierre get pummeled to the ground.

For a moment, I was frozen—the whole world moved in slow motion as Derrick raised his fist, and brought it down to Pierre’s already-bruised face. Still, as he lay with his back to the ground, his eyes moved from the sky to meet mine.

And he smiled.

“Pierre!” I shrieked, lunging onto Derrick. My attempt to wrestle him off of Pierre was futile, and he simply pushed me to the ground. With my lack of exercise, I was stupid to even think I could take him on.

But Pierre?

He must’ve lost his goddamn mind.

As I scrambled to my feet, I heard the gasps of a crowd of students forming around us, closing in like they were an audience to a bullfight, no—something closer to home, more disturbing. It reminded me of so many times Elliot and his boys had pulled some idiotic stunt on me and Pierre only to have us laughed at in the eyes of a hundred kids our age, as if getting humiliated was their true source of amusement.

Everyone else blurred out around me and I could only focus on Pierre. He'd somehow managed to wiggle out from under Derrick. His nose was streaming with blood. Just as he was about to pull back his arm for another punch, Tommy was already behind him, and knocked Pierre to the ground as if he were made of nothing.

Around us, the crowd thickened. I knew they were enjoying this. And for a moment, their eyes became the eyes of our high school classmates, people who I had once thought were nice, bystanders to our own humiliation. And they did nothing. They just stood there, just laughed.

I looked up to find Pierre curled up into a ball on the ground, arms folded over his head to block another blow. But, for a split second, no matter how hard I blinked, it wasn't Derrick that had him pinned to the ground.

It was Elliot.

And it wasn't the laughter of a hundred strangers that surrounded us. It was Vivian's, just her voice.

Looks can be deceiving.

Before I knew what I was doing, my hands were on Derrick's neck. My whole body felt on fire, like I was going to explode if I didn't get Pierre away from them. Away from him.

Elliot.

Maybe he had never physically assaulted us, but he damn right might as well have. There was no difference between guys like him and guys like these.

I shouldn't have ever forgotten that.

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“Get away from him,” I seethed, bending down so that I practically spat in Derrick’s ear. He let go immediately whirling around as if he’d just been spoken to by a ghost.

“Fine, he’s all yours,” he muttered, backing away with his hands up. “Bitch.”

He nodded to Tommy, and the two of them shouldered their way through the crowd and out of sight. As soon as our audience realized the fight was over, they turned away as if it never happened, and by the time I reached for Pierre the crowd had thinned out almost completely. Fucking jerks.

Of course, everyone wanted to be a part of the action as long as they weren’t actually involved.

One person.

One person is all it could’ve taken, someone to stand up for Pierre. The same happened back in high school. The rest of the world would stop and stare for however long it took for something interesting to end, but not one person would do something. Except for me.

I was the only one to stick up for anyone but myself.

Bending over Pierre, I searched his bloodied, bruised face, my hands shaking as they hovered over his skin, as if to protect him from even more blows. Just as I was about to look up to call for help, I caught his gaze in mine. I expected to see tears, but to my disturbance, he was smiling.

It was my own tears that were blurring my vision, dripping onto his shirt.

“How’d you ... do that?” he asked, sounding way more excited than he should have. “That was fucking ... ” He let out a long cough, “ ... amazing.”

I didn’t have the brain capacity to respond. Instead, I stood up and whipped out my phone just as a group of campus security guards can rushing toward us with a stretcher. My mind only registered the sound of an ambulance as it came veering to a stop seconds away from hitting us. The security guards scooped Pierre up onto the stretcher and the ambulance doors busted open.

“I’m okay, I’m fine,” I heard Pierre moan as they loaded him into the van. “Let me down. I’m fine, I swear. Kat!”

Shaking my head, I turned away to wipe the tears from my cheeks. His question echoed over and over in my head, because I didn’t know the answer myself. No, I did.

Because it wasn’t Derrick, or Tommy, or whoever the fuck who I was punching. It wasn’t them I’d wanted to tear to shreds.

It was Elliot.

It was the anger I’d holed up in myself for years. And it made me want to vomit.

“Excuse me, miss,” someone said. After giving my eyes a good rub, I turned around to find a middle-aged woman dressed in a uniform. Campus police. “I’m going to need to ask you a few questions about what just happened here.”

Nodding, I took in a deep breath and explained what happened. But even as I spoke, the words spilling out of my mouth felt like glue and I couldn’t hear my own voice. I

didn't want to speak to anyone except Pierre.

I was numb.

A few minutes passed by before the officer left me to join her group to flag down some other students to question.

Fuck them.

I just wanted to go home.

"Hey," said a soft voice. I pretended not to hear it. Keeping my eyes down, I went to walk back toward the perimeter of the campus so that I could get a ride home. Taking in a deep breath, I tried to think about what the officer had told me. She said I could see Pierre at the university health center in a couple of hours. For some reason, Pierre's voice floated through my head, and I couldn't help but giggle at the thought.

Shame, he'd say. We didn't even get to see the library.

Yup. That was Pierre, my boy.

"Hey," the voice said again, and it became obvious to me that whoever was speaking was trying to get my attention, not someone else's. I looked up. There was a girl standing to the side of me, holding a stack of books under one arm while holding out a tissue with the other. She smiled. "Here," she said, offering it to me.

I detected a faint accent—Irish, maybe Scottish. She was pretty, a sweet kind of pretty, more Tara than Vivian. That made me accept the tissue with a smile back.

"Thanks," I said, pressing it to my nose. After blowing into it, I crumpled up the tissue and stuffed it into my coat pocket. The girl was still standing there, and didn't



seem like she was planning on walking away. I nodded to her. “Are you a student here?”

“Yeah. This is my first year.” She held out her hand to me, not seeming to care that I’d just used both my hands to cradle Pierre’s bloody face and then blow my nose. “I’m Cassidy.”

I reached out my arm and shook her hand anyway. “Kat.”

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“Are you a student as well?” Cassidy asked, hefting the books into both of her arms.

I shook my head, sniffing. “No, I ... I’m here to visit my friend. Pierre. The one who was just got beat up. He goes to school here,” I explained, sounding like I was reading off a script. I just wanted to get out here. “Look,” I said, pressing another grim smile onto my lips. “I appreciate the act of kindness, but I should really—”

“You and Pierre are friends?” Her voice perked up, and then her whole expression fell into deep concern. She took another step closer to me, drawing her eyebrows together as she put a hand to her chest. “I’m so sorry. Oh my God. See, I saw what was happening and called campus security. Jesus. Are you going to be okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. Thanks,” I said quickly, narrowing my eyes at her. The way she said Pierre’s name—it was as if she knew him personally. “You two know each other?”

Cassidy looked confused for a moment before replying, “Pierre? Yeah, well ...” She glanced downward, as if she was trying to hide her blushing. I let out a long breath. “He’s a classmate of mine. We have molecular bio together.” Lifting an eyebrow, she leaned forward as if to whisper a secret. “Just between us girls, I kind of fancy him a bit. You’re his friend, so, I understand if that makes things weird, or whatever. But that’s the truth, anyway. I’d rather tell you than not.”

I shook my head, not because it was a little weird, considering that I had fucked him less than twelve hours ago. This girl was too sweet to need to know that.

“It’s not weird at all,” I replied, smiling genuinely at her for the first time, using the

moment to really look at her. Warm, large brown eyes, petite mouth, slightly alternative style of dress—ripped jeans coupled with a jean jacket, the logo of some British band painted along the sleeves. “Actually, I think you two would be cute together. Have you asked him out?”

I meant it. If I wasn’t practically the only girl Pierre had spoken to since his birth, then someone like Cassidy would be his best bet. I liked her for him—he deserved someone like her. Someone who’d call for help while witnessing a fight rather than stand and watch. In other words, someone decent. You think that’d be a given.

It wasn’t.

Besides ... it’s not like what was going on between Pierre and I was serious. We loved each other for many reasons, but most of all, because we were best friends. Nothing would change that.

Cassidy’s mood seemed to plummet the second the question slipped out of my mouth. Part of me wondered if she knew about me and Pierre, or that she’d been friend-zoned by him for a while now and was aware of everything. But there was no way she’d be this friendly toward me.

People could be nice, they could have good hearts. They could call the police. But love triangles? They don’t work. Not in the real world.

“No, I haven’t,” she said, shrugging. “Well, I couldn’t, even if I wanted to. He has a girlfriend. I mean, I’m sure you know about it all. But you understand where I’m coming from, I mean, I wouldn’t want to cause a conflict or any of that. That’s the last thing I’d want.”

Now this was interesting. So, maybe Pierre did talk about me as his girlfriend. Maybe he did see us as something more than ... best friends with benefits.

Time to test the waters.

“No way,” I said, leaning in toward her as I crossed my arms. “I wasn’t aware of that, actually. Who is it?”

I expected the girl to lift an eyebrow at me and say something like, Um, I’m pretty sure it’s you.

Instead, she replied with something I’d never thought I’d hear in a million years.

“I don’t know, really.” She shrugged as she did last time, as if she didn’t care, because it was none of her business. Yeah. Maybe she was too nice. “Apparently it’s an online type of thing. He told me he got some random text one day from someone. Turns out the girl who texted him got the number from some other guy, who’d given her a fake number after a bad date. She texted him anyway and they started talking. They seem pretty serious for a long-distance relationship. Kind of romantic, I guess.”

“Yeah,” I snorted, turning away from her, “I guess.”

Something told me Pierre was just making shit up instead of explaining to people our real situation. But why?

Was he ashamed of me?

She must’ve noticed my little moment of internal agitation, because I felt her hand on my shoulder and she began to guide me forward. “Do you need help getting somewhere? If you’re staying in the city, there’s a shuttle that goes to Trafalgar Square.”

“No, I’m alright, thanks,” I replied, politely shrugging her off. “I should probably stick around, since I’ll have to go check up on Pierre.”

It didn't make sense to go back to the apartment, anyway. What was I supposed to do there?

Cassidy nodded. "Want me to show you around? At least keep you company until you go to see him."

She said the offer so carefully, as if afraid that I might reject it. I couldn't push this girl away, not now. Maybe I could get to know her, help her, even—who knew, maybe if I could find out what made this girl tick, then I could help her convince Pierre that she was better for the both of us.

Or maybe ... I just wanted to distract him.

Anything to keep him from finding out the truth about Elliot. Anything to keep from breaking his heart. And if I did, at least he'd have someone else to help heal it. Maybe that made me a sick person. Maybe it made me a bad friend.

Either way, I was just doing what was right for him. That's all I ever tried to do.

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“Why not?” I replied, accepting her suggestion. “Actually, Pierre was going to give me a little tour of the library. Can we go there?”

“Sure, good idea,” Cassidy said, freeing up one arm to take mine in hers. The close contact was a little unexpected, and to be honest, the only place I really wanted to be was at Pierre’s side. “It’s an amazing place. There’s six levels, and even though it’s an old building, there’s these skylights that let in the moonlight just as well as sunlight.”

“That’s great,” I said, a bit distracted as I felt my phone vibrate. Pulling it out, I saw that it was Elliot again. I couldn’t let him go a second time. “Hey,” I said, slowing down. “Is there a bathroom I could use around here?”

Cassidy nodded, and pointed to the cafeteria. We hadn’t traveled very far from it.

“There’s one on the first floor before the dining room. You can’t miss it.” I smiled in thanks, but hesitated leaving her as she looked at me. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah,” I replied quickly, backing away toward the building. “Just wanna wash my hands up. I’ll be right back.”

I left before she could say anything else, before she could notice the anxiety in my trembling voice or the fact that I was beginning to blush despite being thousands of miles away from him. I let Elliot’s call go, but as soon as I entered the cafeteria building, I remembered there was a couple handicap restrooms with single stalls around the corner. I went past the regular restrooms, and locked myself into a handicap stall.

Alone, I took out my phone, called Elliot back, and sucked in a few deep breaths.

He picked up immediately.

“Look who’s alive,” his voice muttered through the speaker.

It was obvious. He was angry. Preparing for a lecture, I leaned back against the door, and stared at my reflection in the mirror across from me. God, I looked terrible. You’d think that girl would have pointed out the fact that my arms up to my elbows were speckled with dried blood.

My hand that held the phone up to my ear looked just as fucked up.

The quiet moment between us was sadder than anything else. Another second passed, and I could hear him let out a sigh.

“How’s it going over there?”

It wasn’t what I’d been expecting to hear, which was a good thing. My shoulders relaxed, and I rested my head back against the door.

“Pretty ... okay,” I replied, wondering if it was true as I waited a moment for his response. Silence. “How are you?” I tried.

I could hear some shuffling around in the background, and someone else’s voice. Didn’t resemble either of the other boys’. I decided to ignore it.

“Fine.”

I rolled my eyes. When it came to talking about feelings, he was just as bad as Pierre. At least I could predict what was going on inside Pierre’s knot of thoughts—Elliot was a

whole new puzzle, a complicated one at that.

“Okay ...” I said, taking on the tone of a therapist. “Look.” I took in a breath, and it must’ve been audible over the phone because Elliot cut me off.

“Don’t apologize. I know you’re busy. I just wanted to check in, cause that’s what boyfriends do, or something.”

Shaking my head, I let out a short laugh. “Or something?”

Boyfriend. He called himself my boyfriend. I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry or vomit. Pierre was going to kill me. There was no avoiding it.

“Whatever.” Even over the phone, I could tell he was smirking. He knew that I knew he was putting up an angry facade. He was mischievous at heart. Anger wasn’t his thing, it was mine. “You still sound American, so that’s good.”

I snorted, and decided to put on my worst British accent. “I don’t date patriots, lad,” I said playfully, my roundabout way of bringing up the idea that we were an official couple. “At the end of the day, you belong to the Queen.”

He laughed. “That sounded stupid.”

“It did, it really did,” I laughed along, rolling my eyes at little moment of awkwardness. “Anyway. Yeah, it’s been alright. We went to that restaurant Felix’s dad owns. Oh, and guess what—we met the guy.”

“You did?” Elliot sounded genuinely amused. “What’s he like?”

I thought he was joking until a couple seconds passed by, and he didn’t answer his own question.



“You mean...” I began, “you’ve never met him?”

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I could imagine him arching an eyebrow at me, as if to say, And?

“I mean, as far as I know, he’s never really been around,” he finally answered. “I know his mom, though. She’s cool. And hot.”

“Right,” I replied, shaking my head. “Very funny.”

It wasn’t a huge deal, or anything, but I guess I had a soft spot for dudes with troubled relationships with their parents. Even though I barely knew my own father, I couldn’t imagine never being able to see him. I’d want to see him. Maybe it sounded cliché, but to me, family was important. Pierre was just as much family to me as my mom. That proved it.

Speaking of which ...

“How’s he doing?” Elliot asked. “Pierre.”

Hm. Good question.

Part of me wondered if I should fess up. Tell him that there were still feelings between us that had developed into something more ... physical.

“He’s good, in general,” I started. “Except for today. He just got into a bad fight with some ... friends.”

Some enemies would’ve sounded too dramatic.

“A fight?” Elliot laughed. “Pierre, fighting? Over what?”

Fuck.

I’d have to tell the truth sooner or later.

“Me.” I hated how the word sounded coming out of my mouth. “They were harassing me,” I clarified. “So ... he stood up for me, and ended up getting hurt.”

Everything that had happened in the last week, all the drama, all the pain—it had to do with this. It had to do with Elliot’s jealousy and Pierre’s mental health and I had been caught in the middle of it. Of course, there had been more factors at play. If it weren’t for Vivian and that stupid video, then Pierre wouldn’t have been pushed over the edge.

And yet, it sounded crazy, but I was a little thankful.

Because Vivian brought out the envy. She exposed it. It had to come out, sooner or later.

“Wow.”

I waited to hear something more from him.

“That’s all?” I pressed. “Wow, what?”

“Wow, as in, I didn’t think he was capable of doing that.” I could imagine him raising his eyebrows at Felix or Leo, as if to say, You don’t believe this shit, do you? But it sounded like he was alone. “Good for him.”

I was pleased with his response. Maybe he had worked some of that possessiveness

out of his psyche.

Just as I was about to say something, I heard a gruff voice from the background of Elliot's phone, and it sounded like he was getting up to move from wherever he had planted himself.

"One sec."

I waited until the shuffling stopped, and heard him talking to someone. Definitely wasn't one his friends.

"Hey," he said after a moment. "What were you gonna say?"

"Nothing," I said, having forgotten whatever was supposed to come out of my mouth.

"Where are you?"

"My dad's. He's—"

Ah. That explained the grumbling in the background. Elliot seemed to leave the phone for another second. I made out a few words—sounded like fuck you, and what she wants. Who she wants? No. It could've been anything, really.

Finally, Pierre returned. "Is everything alright?" I asked.

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“Yeah.” Liar. “My dad’s just on my ass about cleaning my room. Or, our room, technically.”

Sure.

It had to be about more than just his room. Wait.

“Our room?” I said, wondering if I misheard. “We don’t live together. Well, not really, anyway.”

“No. My dad and I. We share a room in his apartment.”

Oh.

“Well ...” I didn’t know what to say. My mom and I had shared an apartment together back when I was in high school, but it was spacious enough for us to grant us our own privacy. “That sucks.”

“Yeah. It does.” His dad’s voice thundered through the speaker, and I could catch Elliot yelling back at him just before he could move the phone from his ear. “Look,” he said quickly. “I’ll call you later, okay?”

He hung up before I could tell him that later could be a problem. Oh, well. I couldn’t keep that poor girl Cassidy waiting out there forever.

I wanted to ask him about his mom. The way Elliot talked about his family made it seem like his father was its lord, savior and king all wrapped into one—there was no

Lancaster family. There was just his father, his father's son, and his wife.

Didn't have to meet the guy to know I didn't like him.

Slipping my phone away, I went over to the sink and scrubbed my hands with a soapy paper towel until the blood was gone. Elliot was hiding something. It was pretty fucking obvious.

But hey, I wasn't going to pry. If he wanted to keep his family life a private matter, then that was fine with me. But it did mean one thing.

If there were secrets between us, things we couldn't tell, then we weren't together. We could fuck, we could kiss, and we could say whatever we wanted. But we weren't in love.

Love doesn't hide.

"Kat?"

I jumped at the sound of Cassidy's voice, shocked at the fact that she'd have the audacity to bust open the bathroom door without knocking. But the door was still closed, and it was just her voice coming from the hallway.

"Yeah, sorry. I'm done," I called back, shaking my head. Jesus. How did she know I was in this stall?

Whatever.

Pushing open the door, instead of meeting Cassidy's eyes, I was face to face with Tommy. He had his arm around Cassidy's shoulders. My first thought was that he was forcing her along with him, that he had made her tell him where I had gone so

that he could come mess with me even more. But the look Cassidy's face was anything but meek, or submissive. No.

I had let my guard down too fast.

"I knew you looked familiar to me when I saw you," Tommy said, raising an eyebrow at Cassidy, as if they were having a telepathic side conversation. "I heard you've been messing with my cousin."

Scrunching my eyebrows, I looked between the two of them. Cassidy, his cousin? Messing with her?

Huh?

"Hey, babe. I'm going to get going," Cassidy said, standing on her tip toes to plant a kiss on Tommy's cheek before walking away. "Nice meeting you, Kathleen."

Kathleen. Great.

So, they knew who I was, but I didn't know who they were. Of course, no matter where I went, it was as if trouble was destined to follow me there.

I could go around the globe twice if I wanted—and I'd still have a target on my back.

"My cousin," Tommy repeated, moving forward so that he blocked me from leaving the bathroom. "Vivian Russo."

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Of course.

Miss Vivian fucking Russo.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I responded, letting out an exhausted breath. I didn’t think I would have to hear her name after travelling halfway around the world. Should’ve known, with my luck. “Maybe you got me mixed up with someone else.”

I prayed to God he’d fall for that.

“Look,” Tommy said, lowering his voice. He dipped his head down so that he was at eye level with me. “I know about it all. You bullying her—and I’d like you to consider this a warning. But—” His gaze became lethal. “If I hear about anything else, then you’ll be dead.”

I could only stare at him like I hadn’t heard a thing.

“What?” I said, blinking.

What the hell did he think I was doing to his cousin?

Other than defending myself, nada. I had only given to her what she had coming. Nothing more, nothing less.



Besides, I thought that was over, done with.

I no longer had any reason to mess with her.

“I know about what you did,” he continued, changing his tone as if talking to a two-year-old. “You might think that misconstruing her family life is funny and all, but let me tell you, darling, telling lies doesn’t make you any prettier.”

My jaw dropped. I couldn’t believe the shit that was flying out of his mouth.

“Let me rephrase,” he said, leaning in even closer. “They don’t make you pretty. Or even decent.”

“Is that supposed to make me cry, or something?” I scoffed, trying to push past him. But he shoved me back into the bathroom. It was a weak retort to his comment, mostly because I felt like I was on the verge of crying my eyeballs out. “Hate to break it to you, but I don’t think you know anything about your cousin.”

“I know that you poked fun at her addiction,” he said, stepping into the bathroom and closing the door behind him. “I know that you humiliated her with it. Framed her as a drug dealer to get her kicked out of school.”

Addiction? Come on.

“What? No, I—” My back was up against the wall, and I could hardly think straight as the blood went rushing to my head. “I didn’t do that. She did it to herself. Her room was checked and they found whatever it is she had. I had nothing to do with that. She was the one who wanted me kicked out.”

This was insane.

He was just flipping the script—everything that Vivian wanted to do to me was suddenly my doing.

I just didn't get it.

Why did this girl hate me so much?

“And on top of that ...” Tommy continued, stepping closer to me. All of a sudden, his hands were pressed up against the wall on either side of me, suffocating me. “You prostitute yourself for revenge on someone who doesn't deserve it. You're fucked up, that's what you are. Miserable.”

The tears were flowing down my cheeks now without shame. My lips were trembling. Because it made sense. He was only telling the truth—saying everything I'd been saying to myself in thoughts, in nightmares.

I was sick. I was messed up. All because, for once in my life, I had stood up for myself. That was the truth.

So be it, I was fucked up.

If being fucked up was what it took to be strong, to be resilient, then I'd take it.

“This is what you wanted, isn't it?” Tommy muttered, his hand travelling down to my waist. “Who's going to save you now, sweetheart?”

I was frozen, but my lungs were on fire. Inside, I was screaming.

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But my throat was drowned with cold tears.

I moved my lips, mouthing the words I wanted to say. It was pathetic. His hand was down past the waistband of my pants, grasping roughly at my skin, fingers curling around the fabric of my panties.

“Isn’t this what you wanted?” he muttered again, jerking his thumb along my clit, making me shudder. “Huh? I think it’s obvious, sweetheart.”

“Stop,” I managed to whisper, struggling to take in a breath even after that one word that sounded so weak, so feeble. “S...”

“Shut up.”

He smacked his hand over my mouth. The force was enough to knock my head to the side, and I felt the burn of a mark on my jaw.

“I’ll fuck you up, alright,” Tommy hissed in my ear. His fingers tightened around my pussy, clutching me like a piece of fruit that he could crush with a single flex of his palm. “I’ll fuck you so hard.”

“Fuck you,” I snarled, finally managing the strength to grab onto his neck, trying to dig my nails into his skin.

He responded by yanking his hand out of my pants and shoving both my arms up against the wall, gripping my wrists so hard his hands felt like iron handcuffs.

I knew I was strong.

Mentally, emotionally.

But I couldn't deny the fact that he was physically stronger. And no amounts of teeth baring or swears or resistance could change that.

So, I surrendered.

"Please ..." I begged, hating the sound of my shaking voice. "I didn't do it. I didn't do anything. I'm sorry. Just, please—"

"Sorry's not going to cut it, sweetheart."

He clamped his hand back over my mouth.

"Maybe this will."

Keeping his one hand over my mouth, he moved his other to his belt.

I closed my eyes.

"Kat!"

And then, all of a sudden, he was off me. Vanished. It felt like a cloud of smoke had been pulled out of my gut and my arms released from chains. Collapsing to the floor, I cradled my head in my hands, and just remained there. My skull was throbbing so hard I felt like it'd crack.

You're fucked up, that's what you are. I couldn't get those words out of my head.

“Kat,” the voice said again, closer to me now. Too close. I felt their breath on the top of my head, their hands hovering over me. I didn’t know who it was, couldn’t guess in a hundred tries, but all I knew was that it wasn’t Pierre.

“Get away from me,” I growled into my knees, keeping my eyes squeezed shut.

You’re fucked up.

I just wanted to go home.

“Kat, it’s me,” the voice said again. He said again. “Look up. Please. It’s okay. You’re okay.”

Nope. Still not Pierre.

Curled up there against the wall of a university restroom, I came to a grand realization—I hated men. For now, at least.

I loved fucking men—but I fucking hated them. Even hate wasn’t strong enough a word to describe how much I wanted every single man in a ten-mile radius of me to drop dead.

Besides Pierre, of course.

The begging stopped, and I felt a presence beside me, as if the person had sat down next to me against the wall. For a moment, everything was quiet. I breathed. One breath in, one out. I counted them coming and going, slowly, slowly.

And, finally, looked.

“Hey,” Felix said, cracking a small smile. “It’s good to see you.”

Closing my eyes again, I took in another couple of deep breaths before opening them again. He was still there, more than a figment of my imagination. His brown gaze was soft, allowing me sink into them like a cushion. I didn’t need his arms around me, I didn’t need his embrace to console me. I just needed to look into him, to see him there, to know I wasn’t alone.

Instead of saying anything, he leaned his head back against the tiled wall, maintaining eye contact with me. I found myself doing the same.

A moment later, we both found ourselves giggling.

“Fuck,” I finally said, my voice coming out raspy from all the internal whimpering and swallowing teary mucus. “I mean, how the fuck did you get here?”

I still couldn’t believe that he was here. When I had said goodbye to him and Leo, he hadn’t given any hints to make me believe he was planning to make the trip as well. Maybe Elliot had sent him. I snorted at the thought.

Right. As if Elliot had some sort of telepathic sense that told him when his “girlfriend” was in danger so that he could teleport his henchmen to come to the rescue at a moment’s notice. Wouldn’t that be nice.

And yet, that was the only reason I could see for why he would be here.

“My dad wanted to see me,” he replied, shrugging, his gaze shifting away from me. For someone who used to be the prince of a suburban high school, he was weirdly shy. I guess they all were when it came to matters of their private life. “Honestly, I don’t really know why I’m here. He didn’t tell me, exactly. Something to do with the business.”

“Huh,” was all I could manage. He seemed to pick up on my weariness, because he focused his eyes back on me.

Again, he waited, as if he knew there was more I wanted to say. Of course, there was so much I wanted to say, even more I wanted to ask, but I was too tired.

“Hey,” he said, standing up. He stretched his hands down to me. “Where are you staying? I can bring you back.”

Shaking my head, I took his hands in mine and he hoisted me up to my feet. “No, it’s fine. I should stay here.”

I expected him to ask why, but to my surprise, he simply nodded in understanding. Maybe he’d heard about what happened. Without a word, he guided me out the door, his hand gently holding mine.

“How’d you know I was here?” I asked, wiping my nose with the sleeve of my coat, while trying to hide the worn-out tone of my voice. “And how’d you know I was in the...”

“I saw you and that girl walking into the building,” he replied, guiding me toward the glass doors. We exited the building, and the cold autumn air hit us in a single blast. It caused me to press myself closer against him. “I was across the quad. To be honest, I didn’t know you would be here, but I had a few hours to kill before I had to meet my dad at the restaurant. I figured you and Pierre might be here.”

We stopped on the sidewalk, and I turned my head to look at his face. “Me and Pierre?”

Did he want to see Pierre?

Felix shrugged, keeping his eyes ahead. “I mean, I doubt he’d want to see me, of course,” he started, as if he was reading my mind. “Anyway. Did you use the gift card?”

I nodded.

“Yeah,” I replied, still bewildered that he didn’t mind the idea of seeing me and Pierre together. Elliot and Leo could act as tough as they wanted, but I knew they didn’t have the guts to face my best friend. Elliot, especially. Not after what they did to him.

It’s like they knew Pierre would never forgive them.

“We went to dinner there last night,” I continued, still looking at him, trying to read into his expression. “It was probably the best meal I’ve ever had. So, thank you, again.”

He still avoided looking into my eyes, and all I could do was study his smooth, freckled skin, the curve of his dark eyebrows. His hair had gotten a little longer over the summer, and I was just now noticing how his tawny curls had been slightly



bleached on the bottom half of his head. It was a good look for him.

Without thinking, I reached up to stroke it. That finally caused him to jolt his gaze to mine.

“I mean it,” I said, now that I had his full attention. “I don’t know what would’ve happened if you hadn’t...”

He shook his head. “Yeah.”

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“Yeah,” I repeated, not wanting to go any further. I had been in a lot of horrible situations throughout my life—Felix had even been responsible for some of those moments. But at Woodman, the boys had never done anything to put me in actual danger. It wasn’t in them. That wasn’t something they wanted to do, no matter how much they acted like they hated me.

They’d never rape someone. Anyone.

Tommy wasn’t just a bully.

He was a monster.

“Look,” I said after a moment, dropping my hand from the back of his head. “I need to go see Pierre. Something happened to him.”

Felix’s brow scrunched up, and he looked concerned, but said nothing. Instead, he nodded, and let his arm fall from my shoulders.

“You need me to walk you there?” he asked. I nodded, pressing a smile onto my face. “You sure? Are you okay? For real?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I sighed, trying not to think about having to run into Tommy or Derrick again. Or that two-faced bitch, Cassidy. Psycho. “Besides, it’s probably better that he doesn’t see you right now. But thanks.”

Stepping away, Felix smiled, and gave me a short salute. “Well, then. Guess I’ll see you again back at home.”

“Yeah,” I said, waving bye to him. “Good luck with your dad.”

With that, Felix stuffed his hands into his pockets and turned on his heels, giving me one last tiny glance over his shoulder, a smile lingering on his lips. I watched him walk away a few yards before turning away.

One breath in, one out.

I was lucky.

Too lucky.

The first thing I wanted to do was go find some tiny corner of the world to hide in, somewhere I could be by myself, process my feelings, and never come out.

But before that, I had to see Pierre. Maybe even if I was with him, I could do just that.

Sucking in a deep breath, I started walking toward the health center, a low-brick building across the quad—but not before looking over my shoulder.

Okay.

I was okay.

As I started across the quad, I kept my eyes down, feeling like every time someone passed me by they were glaring into my skull, snickering, forming assumptions in their head, as if they knew me, as if they had seen everything go down themselves.

Suddenly, I stopped walking. I forced my head up.

No. No one was looking at me. No one even noticed I was there. If anything, in their eyes, I was just another student wandering around campus like any other day, trying to pretend I was cooler than I knew I was.

But that didn't matter.

Even if people had been looking, that was no reason to keep my head down. I was Kathleen fucking Silver. I was strong. I went through tons of shit and still kept coming out alive.

That thought made me smirk. Instead of letting my gaze fall back to the ground, I lifted my eyes to the sky.

Still, I couldn't help but wonder—how did Tommy know about my “relationship” with Elliot and his buddies? Sure, whatever Vivian had told him was a skewed version of the story, but even she didn't know about the deal I'd made with them. A deal that I thought no longer mattered.

And why the hell was Felix summoned here by his father?

Shaking my head, I focused on the path ahead of me, and saw that I was nearing the building. Just before I reached for the door, I stopped, and took in a deep breath.

Most of all, how was I going to explain all of this to Pierre?

Whatever.

I'd cross that bridge when I got there. Right now, my sole mission was to make sure Pierre was okay, and get both our asses back home before anything else could happen to us.

And then ...

Then we'd have a talk. A long, heartfelt talk.

And I'd make sure that everything would be okay.

When I stepped into the room, Pierre had a big smile on his face. Even under all the bruises and bandages, he was glowing.

“Hey,” I said, pausing in the doorframe of the small cubicle-like space. He was sitting up on a hospital bed. I smiled back at him. “You okay?”

“More than okay,” he replied, maybe a little too enthusiastically. I mean, he had just gotten pummeled as if he was thrown into a wrestling match. Still, I had known him long enough to know when he was being genuine, and it didn’t sound like he was forcing his words. “Seriously. I feel great.”

“Uh-huh,” I replied, a little sarcastically. “Looks like it.”

“I mean it.” He slid off of the pad and walked over to me, laying his hands on my shoulders. He was grinning, but all of a sudden, his smile faltered. “Something’s wrong.”

I let out a snort.

“You think?” Reaching up, I took his hands in mine. “My best friend just got beaten up over something as stupid as my ass.”

“That’s one way to look at it,” he murmured as I brushed a lock of wavy black hair from his eyes. “Guess I saw it as something more sinister.”

“Yeah,” I said a little absent-mindedly, the bathroom situation clouding up my headspace again. “It could’ve been.”

He held me there for a moment longer, glancing between my eyes before stepping back. He moved to grab his coat, and I noticed him wince as he lifted his arms to slid it on. Suddenly, part of me wondered if he had been expecting a different response from me. Any other girl might’ve said “thank you,” for, you know, standing up for me. But I was just mad at him.

“You didn’t have to do it, you know,” I said. He froze, looking at me. “Seriously. This ...” I gestured up and down his bandaged body. “This wasn’t worth it.”

“I wanted to do it,” he said shortly. “Maybe it wasn’t about you.”

“It doesn’t matter whether or not it was about me. I know why you did it,” I retorted, stepping closer to him. Now there was an edge to my voice. “You did it because you wanted to prove to yourself that you’re not a total pussy.”

The look he shot at me was colder than the freezing London weather, than the feeling of Tommy’s fingers forcing their way inside me.

Pierre let out a heavy breath.

“I know you, Kat,” he said slowly, his dark eyes flickering with shadows. Memories. “You’re just mad because you think of it as your fault. Trust me, I made the choice to go ahead and punch him. You didn’t.”

Nodding, I stepped back toward the door, pulling my gaze away from his. I couldn’t bear to look at him any longer.

“Let’s just go.”

Pierre didn't respond. We left the room in silence, him taking the lead in front of me while I walked a few steps behind. It wasn't awkwardness that enveloped us, but shame. Maybe even embarrassment. Because we both had things to explain, and both of us knew it.

Tommy and Derrick. They were the "friends" he had been speaking so highly of. The guys that offered him a place to stay.

And one of them had tried—almost succeeded—to rape me.

Neither of us had to bring up the fact that we weren't headed to Buckingham Palace. Not after all this. We boarded the shuttle back to Pierre's building in silence. Once we made it back into his apartment, we both collapsed onto the bed, exhausted, and stared up at the ceiling. A few minutes passed. The sound of church bells chimed far in the distance, and Pierre's heater started clanging. The whole apartment seemed to want to break the silence between us.

Another minute or so passed, and Pierre finally moved to go to the bathroom. By the time he came out, I heard the toilet flushing and his voice. Sounded like he had been talking on the phone. A thought occurred to me.

"Should we order in?" I asked as he approached the bed.

Pierre smirked. "Already did."

It was an early dinner, but by the time the delivery guy from C'est Bien rang the bell, we couldn't give a single fuck about the time of day.

"So," I said, through a mouthful of my quiche. "Tell me about these friends of yours."



It was time to set things straight between us. Over food, it'd be ten times easier.

We were calling it dinner, but it was really more like a 4 PM brunch. Pierre was switching between a creamy soup and a croque monsieur, and I couldn't help but giggle as he reached to wipe a cheesy stain off his shirt for the third time.

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“There’s nothing to tell,” he said, licking his fingers. “I help them out, they help me. Simple.”

“Uh-huh,” I pressed. “Sounds familiar.”

He shot me another look, but this time, it was one of mutual understanding. He knew how fucked up this was, how silly it was, and that I knew it too.

“I met Tommy in my molecular bio class,” he started to explain. Ah—same class that Cassidy was in. “We got put together for an assignment this one time, and he was really struggling. Like, really struggling. Turns out, he wouldn’t be in that class if it weren’t for someone else doing all the assignments for him in the pre-req.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “Oh?”

“Yeah. He’s a sophomore,” he said. “Professor must’ve been oblivious as hell, but ... Anyway. The kid who was doing his assignments transferred, and so he was left on his own.”

“Did he tell you all this?” I asked, chuckling. “Cause it sounds like a sob story.”

Pierre shook his head. “I found out from Derrick. But that’s not important.”

He sat back in his chair and let out a burp.

“Sorry. Basically, I offered to help him, but only for a price. He gives me about fifty to two-hundred depending on the size of the assignment. Sometimes more, as long as

he's getting good grades. By which, I mean, I'm getting good grades."

He paused to let it sink in.

"For him," he added, as if I really needed the clarification. As if he was proud of it.

I narrowed my eyes at him, then looked around the apartment.

And then, it all clicked.

"So, that's how you've been paying for this place," I stated, my eyes moving around the furnished space like it was my first time seeing it. Of course, the first time I did see it, my instincts told me that even if it was an old building, it was still too good to be true. The wallpaper was peeling in a few places, but that was about it.

"Yeah..." Pierre replied a little sheepishly. "The university did provide me with housing, technically, but it was on campus. They were so cheap about it, too. Gave me the worst fucking place in the basement of a lecture hall. So, a few weeks after classwork started to ramp up, I ended up finding this place. Rent's not as bad as you think. Plus ... micro-bio gives a fuck-ton of homework."

"Right," I said, nodding slowly as it all came together in my mind. How both of us managed to get ourselves involved with our school's richest brats was still beyond me—brats who happened to be related, at that. "There's something else I wanted to ask you about."

"Shoot."

The whole thing with Tommy made sense, to an extent—it was well within Pierre's territory to forge homework for other people, though this was the first time he was doing it for an incentive than out of straight fear. Back in high school, it was normal

for him to get the trio through their work, but it's not like they needed it. Elliot and his boys were naturally smart. They were just lazy as fuck.

But Tommy needed the help. So it was easy for Pierre to demand a price. That made sense.

Then there was Cassidy, and what she said.

Where the hell did that fit in?

"After the ambulance took you away," I began, "this girl came up to me. Cassidy."

I waited for a reaction from him, but he only copied my expression, as if waiting for more. "And?" he said after a moment.

"Do you know her?" I said, annoyed that I had to help him along. He wasn't dumb. Pierre knew that I was trying to get at something. "Because she definitely knew you."

"Well, yeah?" he said like it was a question, which prompted me to raise an eyebrow. "I mean, I know who she is. She's dating Tommy. But I don't, like, know her."

I kept a stony expression until it was clear to me that he was telling the truth. Pierre was apt to lie sometimes, even though he sucked at it. All it took was a little eye contact, a little pressure, for him to spill.

Nothing.

"Okay..." I continued. "Anyway. She came up to me after the fight and told me that she was the one who called the security over. She also said something about having a crush on you, or something."

Pierre snorted. “Well, that’s not true.”

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“Yeah, but that’s not it,” I said. “She also said that you already have a girlfriend. Like, overseas, or something. Was she talking about me?”

Pierre froze up. And I knew I got him.

“P,” I said, leaning forward on the table. “You can tell me anything. You know that.”

He shifted a bit in seat, and reached up scratch at the patch covering his one eye.

“Yeah. It’s you.”

Uh-huh.

“Okay,” I said instead, leaning back in my chair. A slight smile formed on my lips.

“Well, then we shouldn’t have a problem.” I gave him a wink.

He knew that I knew he was lying. But why was he holding back?

In all honesty, I didn’t give a crap about whether or not Pierre had someone else. If anything, that made me ecstatic—there was someone else to offer him love, the kind of love that I wouldn’t be able to give him. The real kind.

I loved him as a best friend, and maybe the lines were starting to blur a bit—but I could never see a future with him.

To be frank, I couldn’t see a future with anyone.

“So,” he said, breaking me out of my thoughts. “Was there something you were

gonna tell me?”

Right. I still had my story to confess.

Fuck.

“Um, yeah,” I said. Now it was my turn to shrink back into my chair. In my defense, I had every reason to do so. “So, you know how I’m seeing Felix? Kinda?”

Pierre’s expression went cold. He looked at me like I was a stranger, and I half expected him to rise out of his chair and tell me to get the fuck out of his apartment.

“Yeah,” he ground out.

Fuck.

The more I thought about it, the stupider it sounded, and the more I regretted ever getting involved with the three boys. For some reason, Pierre had managed to contain his anger toward me when he found out about Felix—but I hadn’t even wanted to tell him. The only reason I let him know that much was because Felix wanted him to know the gift card was for him, that it was some sort of apology.

But Elliot and Leo had no apologies. At least, not yet.

Looking at his face, I knew I had to just spit it out, say the truth now or forever hold my peace. I couldn’t just sit in front of my best friend and lie about something that involved him.

Taking in a breath, I could feel my heart start to beat faster. After gulping down my words a couple of times, I looked Pierre dead in the eye.

“It’s ... not just Felix,” I said, feeling the world already falling away from me. “It’s Elliot. And Leo. All three of them.”

If it wasn’t for the chair, I would’ve fainted right then and there. Because nothing could prepare me for what Pierre was going to say next, even as shadows clouded his eyes. I could practically see the venom dripping from his lips as he spoke.

I had this coming to me.

There was nothing I could do, except tell the truth.



8

“I know.”

Pierre shrugged, as if it weren't the most cataclysmic moment of our friendship, as if all those haunting years of bullying had never happened, as if I hadn't just betrayed him not only as his friend, but his lover.

As if he'd changed.

I stared at him for a solid minute until I was sure he wasn't joking. Until I was sure this moment was still real.

“What do you mean, you know?” I asked slowly. “You know what?”

“What you just told me,” he answered with another shrug. “You're involved with all three of them. I already knew that.”

I bit my lip, wondering why I felt like I wanted to smash my fist into a mirror. Into my own reflection.

It was his nonchalance. That had be it.

It was infuriating.

“What are you doing?” I said. “You're hiding something.”

Pierre let out a harsh laugh. “What’re you talking about?”

“I don’t know,” I sputtered, narrowing my eyes at him. “You’re not angry, or pissed off? You don’t care? You’re not hurt?”

Again, he shrugged. “I’m tired of being hurt,” was all he said, his gaze void of emotion. “Do whatever you want. As long as I have you, I’m okay. I’m fine.”

Raising my eyebrows, I looked around the room, and after a moment, I threw my hands up in the air as if to say, Great!

Because it was great. It was the best possible fucking outcome. Right?

“How’d you know?” I asked. There was something he wasn’t saying, something that would boil underneath his surface until, one day, it would explode. “Was it Felix? Did he find you?”

“Find me?”

“He’s in London,” I explained. “His father made him come for some reason. We ran into each other at Durham when I—”

Without realizing it, I was choking up. Pierre must’ve noticed it, because he stood up from his chair, and a second later, his arms were around me.

“When you what?” he pried, kneeling down at the side of my chair, one arm desperately stroking my hair while the other grabbed onto my own arm. “Tell me.”

I could feel it all over again. His body forcing itself on me, his voice taunting me, that stupid, pretentious British accent.

At that moment in time, it was anything but sexy.

“Tommy tried to rape me.”

I couldn't look at him. It wasn't embarrassment. It wasn't fear. It was just the feeling of awkwardness, because I never thought I'd have to have this conversation with him, with anyone. The truth was, I just wanted to forget it ever happened. Because it was something I thought happened to other girls. Not me. No, not Kathleen Silver. I was untouchable unless I wanted to be touched.

Yeah. I was the other girl.

I felt Pierre leave my side, and a second later, I heard the door slam shut. And then, a memory passed in front of my eyes—Pierre's gaze looking into my own, his lips mouthing those lethal words. Except, this time, it wasn't him. No, for this first time, it wasn't him.

I want to kill Elliot.

He had said that once to me. And I didn't think he'd ever say those words again, prayed to God he'd never even think them.

“Pierre,” I shouted, scrambling out of the chair. “Stop.”

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I was already in the hallway, but it was too late. He had vanished, the elevator doors sliding closed behind him. Maybe he wouldn't kill him, but he wanted to fuck him up just as bad, if not, worse, than he'd been fucked up, and there was no changing that.

Instead of following him, I ducked back into his unit, quietly closed the door, and sank down against it. And smiled.

It was just as well. That motherfucker deserved it. If Pierre didn't teach him a lesson, then I would.

All of a sudden, there was a knock on the door.

I waited a moment, wondering who the fuck that could be. Not Pierre. Not Felix ... or could it be? How would he have gotten into the building?

The person knocked again, and I decided to rise to my feet and look through the peephole.

To my surprise, it was Cassidy.

"Hell no," I muttered, swinging the door open, already feeling my blood pressure rise. "What the fuck do you want?" I said, in the most deadpan voice I could muster. "A favor?"

I dropped the bad bitch attitude as my eyes scanned her face, and I noticed the redness in her eyes, as if she'd just been crying. Please. If anyone was crying, it should've been me.

“Look,” she said, sucking in a deep breath. Cassidy raised her chin a little higher, as if to steady herself. “I fucked up.”

Leaning against the doorframe, I crossed my arms, and waited for an explanation.

“I heard about what he did to you. Tommy.”

I raised my eyebrows, and did nothing else. Still couldn’t wait for the part about her fucking up. Oh, was it when she lied about being an innocent saint and decided to leave me alone with a fucking predator?

“I broke up with him.” I couldn’t tell if she was lying. Didn’t know who to trust anymore. “I swear. It’s fucked up, what he did, you know? I’m sorry. Really. The thing is, he was telling me about how you were treating his cousin, and I guess I just blindly believed him. Look, no one deserves what he did to you, regardless of how you treated his cousin. I just wanted to come and apologize.”

“How’d you know about it?” I said. “Did Pierre go to you?”

She shook her head, scrunching her eyebrows together as if she’d forgotten of his existence. Pierre, who?

“Um, no ... It was Tommy. I brought the truth out of him. He came over acting really weird ... like, he couldn’t look me in the eye. And when I asked him what happened, he just exploded.”

Exploded, huh?

“Anyway. Yeah, that’s all. I’m so, so sorry.” Cassidy wiped the water from her eyes and shook her head. “Is there anything I can do to make it up to you?” Her gaze was practically quivering, eyes wide like a deer’s. Sincere, innocent. “Please. I just ... I’m

sorry.”

Letting out a rough breath, I glanced down the hallway to make sure we were out of earshot from anyone who might have the inclination to gossip. We were alone, and Pierre was still gone. That didn’t make me feel any better.

I could believe her, or not. Maybe it didn’t matter.

If she was offering to help me out, then I couldn’t pass it up.

“Don’t be sorry,” I said through a tight jaw. “You didn’t do it. He did.”

She nodded deeply, as if in great relief for my recognizing the obvious fact. No, she didn’t do it. But she pretended to be nice to me, pretended to like Pierre just to get on my good side.

But the way she explained it to me made it sound like she had acted this way because Vivian had convinced Tommy that I was the evil one. She was just trying to stand by her boyfriend’s side. She had been fooled. She wasn’t to blame.

“Okay,” I said, giving her a small smile. “Thanks for coming to tell me this.”

I thought about what she was offering me. A chance to learn more, a chance to figure out exactly what kind of lies Vivian was spinning. And why.

And then I thought about the text I got on the plane, just before taking off.

“The library,” I started. “Is it open at 10 PM?”

Cassidy tilted her head to the side, confused.

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“It closes then,” she answered. “Why?”

I chuckled a bit at the thought of trying to explain to her that I’d gotten some cryptic text telling me to be at that specific location and time, but instead, I explained, “No reason. You think people abide by that rule?”

Again, she cocked her eyebrow up. “Um ...”

“Never mind.” I waved it off. “I don’t need anything from you right now, but thanks for offering. It means a lot.”

“No problem.” She smiled brightly, and took a hesitant step away. “I’m actually two floors up. Apartment 30, if you need anything.”

“Thanks,” I said, giving her a short wave. “See ya.”

She hurried away, and I watched her go. Once she was out of sight, I collapsed against the doorframe, and closed my eyes, listening for more footsteps.

Where the fuck did Pierre go?

Rolling my eyes, I turned back into the apartment, closed the door behind me once more, and waited a second or two in case someone else felt the need to knock on the door. Nope. I was free to move.

Emotionally exhausted, and on the brink of a food coma, I jumped onto the bed, wincing as the old springs shrieked with my body settled into the mattress. 10 PM.

Durham Library.

I didn't have the slightest clue as to who sent that text, but I'd be there. Pierre was hiding something, and if this had anything to do with him, then I needed to do everything I could to find that out.

But for now, I would nap.

I had a feeling that there would be a long night ahead of me.

"Sweet dreams," I whispered to myself. Couldn't wait until I could say the same thing to Miss Russo herself. "Bitch."

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It had been four hours. Pierre still wasn't back.

Picking up my phone for the tenth time, my finger hovered over his number, my eyes looking at all the voicemails I had sent him. No replies, no texts, nothing. At first, I had been a little thrilled that he was getting his anger out in some way—thought that maybe he was taking a walk, or had gone to have a talk with his 'friend' Tommy. But the longer I waited in his apartment, the less convinced I was that he was going to do either of those things.

Even though it made sense for him to get riled about something that had—almost—no, basically happened to me, it didn't make sense for him to say nothing about it to me. Yeah, he knew I could handle my own emotions. I was tough in that sense. But in theory, wasn't I the one who needed the consolation?

Shaking my head, I got up from the bed and went to put on my coat. Enough of this.



Cassidy hadn't lied to me—the school's website also noted that the library was set to close at 10, which meant I had about an hour to get in there and find somewhere to hide out.

If Pierre wanted to reach out to me, then by all means, my voicemail was empty and ready to receive his string of excuses.

But I couldn't keep waiting around for his ass to show up.

It took me a couple tries to lock up, wiggling the spare key around in the old brass keyhole before finally clamping the door shut and getting on my way. Once I was outside, the sky had darkened to a deep violet, and it looked as if a thin layer of snow had coated the ground. The narrow residential streets were empty, parked cars cold and dark on the insides as the windows of neighboring apartments were lit up a warm golden-yellow.

As I neared the shuttle stop, part of me was convinced that the fact I was in a foreign country meant I needed to start speaking another language. All the French food had me wondering if Pierre had fooled me into thinking he was going to school in Britain, when Felix really bought me a ticket to France.

Already spent more than twenty-four hours in a city I'd never been in, in a country I'd never been to, and I had barely seen any of it. So far, it was all drama. The motherfucking drama. It just seemed to follow me. Stalk me. Couldn't I just have one good day?

Anyway.

I'd have to suck it up. This was my life, after all. I had no choice but to live it. Roll with the punches.

Literally.

The shuttle dropped me off at the same location as when Pierre and I had arrived on campus for the first time. I was the only one on the shuttle besides a couple of other girls who sat apart from one another. My paranoid side wondered if they had something to do with this, if they were headed for the library just like I was. Maybe this was a cult. Maybe the text was meant to be for someone other than me.

No. It had to have been for me. What were the odds that I was going to receive that text just as I was traveling to meet up with a friend who went to Durham?

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Small. That's what they were.

I could feel my heart beat harder against my chest as I fumbled through the dark toward the library. Fortunately, the broad glass windows of the building were still ablaze with light, and a few students were trickling out from the revolving doors. I wasn't alone, and yet, I felt alone—unsafe.

Because he could be here. This was his territory.

All of a sudden, I paused, my hand reaching for my phone. A moment later, my phone was pressed against my ear as I called Felix.

"Please pick up ..." I muttered, glancing around at my surroundings. It's not like I was expecting anyone to sneak up on me, but I wouldn't have been surprised to bump into Tommy or Derrick. "Please ..."

"Kat?"

His voice, warm, raspy, familiar—it was just what I thought it would be. Never, in all my years at Woodman, would I have ever expected to one day pick up the phone and call Felix Rosenberg, let alone Elliot or Leo.

"Hey, yeah," I started out awkwardly, and let out a short chuckle at how stupid I sounded. "Sorry. This is ... a really weird ask of you, but I'm at the Durham campus. There's something I need to do here, and ... I think it might have something to do with Vivian."

He was silent at the other end for a moment, once again waiting for me to finish.

“I understand if you’re busy, or something,” I continued, “but I was wondering if you could come here? I just ... I don’t know what’s going to happen. I’d rather have someone with me.”

He was quiet for another moment, and then he said, “Yeah, of course. I can be there in ten.”

“Thanks so much,” I breathed, not realizing how much of that breath I was holding in.

“Where are you?”

“Near the library,” I answered. “Sorry, this is so ... abrupt. I can explain it to you when you get here.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Felix said, and hung up. Slowly, I let my arm fall to my side, and slid the phone into my coat pocket. No matter how hard I tried, how much I listened, it was impossible for me to get a read on him. He made it sound as if it would only make sense that he would be here with me—not because he cared, but because it was the right thing to do. Just like stopping Tommy was the right thing to do. He would’ve done that for anyone.

“Fuck,” I muttered, shaking my head at the thought that maybe, just maybe, there was something more than lust going on between us. “If you catch feelings, I swear ...”

I swore what?

That I’d never forgive myself?

Rolling my eyes, I started pacing around the grassy area surrounding the library, trying to unwind the generous fog of thoughts that now clouded my mind. Liking Elliot was ... complicated. There was something about him that made my heart beat faster, that gave me energy, a thrilling feeling. Being around the other two boys was a different experience. I was attracted to them because they were hot. That was the bottom line.

But I didn't give a shit about them as far as anything else went. I guess, somehow, they'd become my friends.

I just couldn't imagine actually falling for either of them.

A few minutes later—exactly ten, to my surprise—I recognized Felix's figure come walking up to me from across the quad. The sky had dimmed even more since we had talked on the phone, a product of the toughening winter. Still, it was easy for me to spot his chilled-out, loping stride, even though his face was hidden by the shadow of his hood.

It was weird. When he wasn't around the other two, it was like his personality changed completely. He was humble, confident, independent—and I liked that about him.

But was it the real Felix?

Or was this just another guise?

Guess I was about to find out.

"Hey," we said at the same time, which prompted a chuckle from us both as we started walking toward the library entrance. For some reason, I was a little nervous, and despite the cold I could feel myself blushing, as if this was our first date rather

than an investigation of some middle-of-the-night ruse. Felix didn't seem to mind the silence, though, as we entered the library. While I flashed an extra student ID that Pierre had given me, Felix simply nodded at the kid manning the reception desk. Guess everyone knew who he was here.

“So,” he said, as we came to the elevator. “What’s the plan?”

Nodding, I stepped a little closer to him, and glanced over my shoulder to make sure we weren't being listened to.

“I got a text from this number,” I explained, pulling out my phone to show him. “Do you recognize it?”

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Durham Library, 4th floor study room, 10 PM.

Felix shook his head slowly. “Nah.”

“Well ...” I sucked in a breath as I quickly swiped up on the screen—still no texts from Pierre. “I figured I should see what it’s all about. Thought maybe Vivian had something to do with it.”

With a shrug, Felix replied, “As long as you feel safe.”

I looked at him, trying to listen between the lines of what he just said. Yeah, it was pretty straight forward—but I just didn’t understand what exactly was going through his head. Did he know something that I didn’t? Maybe he was lying. Maybe he did know who that text was from. Maybe he was the one sent it.

Shaking my head, I pressed the elevator button.

It didn’t matter whether not he knew something. It was my call to have come here in the first place, so if something happened, then I was the only one I could blame. I asked Felix to come with me, after all. And Pierre was MIA.

The elevator dinged, and just as we were about to step inside, the kid at the front desk called out to us, “We’re closing in twenty minutes, just so you know.”

Felix threw up a hand in acknowledgement and a moment later, the doors were closing behind us. Thankfully, we were the only ones in the car. I pressed the button to bring us to the fourth floor.

“Hey, can I ask you something?” Felix said a couple seconds after the car started lifting us up. It was a bit unexpected, and just as I was going to respond with an obvious yes, the doors opened.

The fourth floor was already dark, as if the security had finished making their sweep of the level and figured no one else was coming up for the night. The overhead lights were all out, except for one in the center of the ceiling. It cast a dim yellow glow around the metal bookshelves, and turned the blue carpeting a dark green.

“This is kinda creepy,” Felix murmured as we shuffled out of the elevator. I nodded in agreement, squinting to try and find clues as to whether something was happening here, if anyone was around. So far, quiet. Empty.

Just us.

“We’re early,” was all I said in return, and started toward the shelves. “Let’s wait.”

Felix followed me. I continued walking through the two tall shelves that led to where the single stream of light fell, running my hand along the plastic-covered volumes and the gaps between them. Once we were beneath the light, I paused, and turned to face Felix.

He was looking around at the books, inspecting them, almost—like he was interested in reading. Honestly, it would’ve surprised me if that was the case. He never struck me as the type to have anything to do with books unless a class forced him to.

He plucked one off the shelf, a thin copy of Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time*. My jaw almost dropped right then and there.

Felix must’ve noticed my expression out of the corner of his eye, because he turned to me with a smirk as he flipped through the pages.



“You’ve read that?” I asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

“You haven’t?” was his response, a little cockier than I expected. Still, he was joking, as he kept on the smirk and slid the book back into its place. “Seriously, though. I used to be super into physics in middle school.”

I let out a snort, but immediately regretted it. There was no laughter in return—just a faint grin. He was being serious.

“Wow,” was all I could muster. “Really?”

“Yeah.” Felix leaned back against the shelf. “I wasn’t smart enough for it. Still not. But it’s interesting shit, if you have the patience for it.”

“Still?”

He turned his head to gaze at me, waiting for clarification.

“You said, still not?” I repeated. “You don’t think you’re smart enough to do physics?”

It had never occurred to me to ask him what he was studying in school. Guess I figured that, whatever it was, it wouldn’t have mattered enough to him anyway. In high school, the three of them, Elliot and Leo included, always acted too cool for school. Sure, they were intelligent. But they didn’t seem interested in using their intelligence.

“Anyone can do it,” Felix answered. “But I wasn’t planning on it as a career choice.”

“What are you planning on?”

A moment passed, and Felix let out a sigh, as if the answer wasn't worth his breath.  
"Same thing as my dad."

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I kept looking at him, giving him the space to continue, but when he didn't, I leaned back against the shelf beside him.

Same thing.

"So ..." I tried, "you're going to be the manager of a restaurant conglomerate."

He shrugged.

"You don't seem too excited about it," I pointed out.

"I don't, huh?" was his only reply, and there was a slight edge to his voice. Sarcasm. It was the first time he had ever gone cold around me, and it took me aback. Time to change the subject.

"Anyway," I said, turning to continue down the corridor of books. "Whoever sent that text told me to meet in the study room."

Without a word, Felix followed me to the opposite side of the room, where it was harder for the light to reach. There were two doors, both with opaque glass windows. The one on the left was labeled the IT room, so I moved toward the door on the right, pausing just before pushing on the handle.

It was locked.

"Nice," I muttered under my breath.

Turning back around, I ended up bumping into Felix. His hands rose up to steady me, or himself, rather. But instead of stepping aside, he held me there, and my eyes had no choice but to linger on his. In the dark, it took me a solid moment to realize how close he was to me, the tip of his nose hovering over my own, his breath floating over my cheeks, warm and reassuring. I didn't have to see him to know he was there. I just had to feel him.

"Do you remember, back at Woodman," he began, his voice soft, low, "how we used to meet up backstage in the auditorium? How the lights were out, and everything was quiet ..."

His forearms were cradling mine, but now, slowly, his hands slid past my elbows so that they were holding my waist, as if we were about to sway into a ballroom waltz.

"And it was just me ..." His lips brushed over my forehead, along my hairline. "... and you."

He whispered the last word in my ear, lips tickling the curve skin. His body was pressed against mine now—we were one unit, breathing into each other, feeding the fire that was growing between us.

"Yeah," I said dumbly, unable to think straight as Felix dipped his head along the side of my neck. Not kissing, just providing enough friction to send tingles down my spine.

"This reminds me of that place," he replied, dragging his nose along the edge of my shoulder. "It reminds me of what we used to do."

In secret, I finished silently, unable to get the words out as I lifted my chin to allow him to continue his search beneath my throat. Every second that passed made the air come harder out of my lungs, and at the same time, made me limp in his grasp. I was

his, now. His breath felt hot blowing down my chest as his nose nuzzled the little crook right between my collarbone. His thick, silky voice curled around my head in a fog, just like his breath, just like his arms.

It reminds me of what we used to do.

What we used to do was anything but emotionally meaningful. It was a give and take sort of scenario—if I sucked his dick, he'd be pleasant toward me for about a week or so before morphing back into his old fucked-up self. I had never minded it, really. It was Felix Rosenberg, after all, not just any other boy.

But mostly, the things I had done were for self-preservation. To defend myself. To make it through another day.

And he had done it because he could.

“I disagree,” I murmured, just as his face came back to meet mine. “This is nothing like what we used to do.”

Before he could respond, I clamped my mouth over his, and immediately felt his tongue sliding against mine—warm, powerful, passionate. The smell of his cologne mingled with the scent of his shampoo, and together, the spiced, flowery scent was overwhelming, almost alcoholic.

All in one breath, I breathed him in, and in that one kiss, Felix had me pinned against the study room door, his hands caressing my neck, massaging beneath my ears as our heads bobbed back and forth in a steady rhythm. I could feel his heart beating against my own chest, humming through me like the reverberations of a bass guitar.

“You’re right,” he breathed, pulling back for a moment, just far enough away so that he could look me in the eyes. Even in the dark, I could tell his were burning. “This is

nothing like it.”

Stepping back, he peeled my body away from the door, keeping me close as our lips connected once again. We stumbled backward, one slow step at a time, toward the shelves. Every rational molecule within me had gone, overcome by the power of his scent, and the wet contact of his tongue weaving around mine.

I just wanted him fuck me.

Needed him to.

This time, as soon as we neared the shelves, I wrapped one leg around his waist and pushed him up against one stack of books. The motion caused the shelf to shudder behind us, and Felix let out a quick curse before tugging me up against him. While one hand remained around the back of my head, I felt the other grasping my butt over the fabric of my pants, alternating between handling one cheek and the other.

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I shifted my attention from his lips to his neck, nipping at the skin below his earlobe as I moved my hands from his shoulders to his hips, fingering with the hem of his shirt. In another second, my fingers were stroking the small mounds of his tightly-packed abs.

My coat had somehow fallen to the floor in the midst of the action, and Felix's coat was already unzipped. In another second, it was off, and I had his shirt was halfway up his ribcage. Getting on my knees, I planted my face into his stomach, breathing in his sultry heat, his sweat, the smell of his cock, pulsing just under my nose.

I lowered my face to the waist band of his pants. Biting onto the edge of the fabric, I playfully tugged at it with my teeth. Felix bucked his hips forward at the little bit of pressure.

Not wanting to waste any more time, my hands moved to undo the zipper. Who knew when some security guard could come busting out of the elevator.

Didn't want to think about that.

With his pants pulled down just enough to permit me access to his cock, I yanked down on the elastic of his boxers and released him. His dick was just as I expected it to be—hot, plump, mine.

“You've missed me, huh,” I muttered, knowing full well this wasn't the first time I'd sucked him since high school, thanks to the deal I had made with Elliot.

I went in for the kill.

His manhood filled my mouth with the force of a torpedo, and he pumped without hesitation, as if my lips were the walls of my pussy, and he was mining for my G-spot.

“Keep going,” he puffed, his fingers digging into my hair, almost pushing me along. “Fuck.”

“I don’t think so,” I said the second I broke away from him. Without letting him protest, I stood up, grabbed his shoulders, and spun us around. His eyes glittered amidst the shadows. “I’m yours.”

“Damn right you are,” Felix purred. Now that we were on the same page, I yanked down my pants, and straightened myself up to give him the honors. With sudden grace, he hooked both his index fingers around the sides of my panties and slowly rolled them down my legs until they had my ankles locked together like some kind of bondage.

“We’re being sloppy tonight, aren’t we?” Felix joked, glancing down at his pants. The cloth of his boxers was hanging down his butt to allow his cock just enough room to expand. Both our shirts were still on, and he hadn’t even touched my tits.

“I’d say the opposite,” I replied, sliding my back down the shelf, spreading my legs wider. My arms hooked over his shoulders as he drew closer, his formed, muscular body pressing against me. “We could make it sloppier.”

Before going any further, Felix bent forward and gave me a deep kiss, his teeth tugging at my bottom lip ever so slightly as he pulled away. My eyelids fluttered closed, and I waited for him to enter me.

And then, I felt his body leave me.



My eyes flew open just in time to see him on the floor with a bloody nose, a figure standing over him. Goosebumps rode up my skin as they turned to face me. It was him.

Pierre.

“What are you doing here?” we practically spat at each other.

I bent over and felt around on the floor for my pants, but all of a sudden, Pierre had me pushed back against the shelf. I could hear books falling to the ground next to me, and felt his cheek pressed against mine, his breath steaming up my ear.

“I love you, Kat,” he hissed. “You know that, right? I love you.”

His voice was choking up as he said the words, words that should’ve meant more to me than they did in that moment. I wanted to accept them, I really did. I should’ve accepted his words, accepted him.

But I couldn’t.

Not right now.

“Hey,” I heard Felix say. “What the fuck is your—”

Pierre spun around, and his fist swung into Felix’s jaw, causing him to collapse back to the floor. Leaving me to shudder against the shelf, Pierre stepped over to him. Even with his arm bound up in bandages, his punches were still harder than what he’d done to Tommy.

“Get up,” he barked. “Or I’ll make you.”

“I’m not gonna fight you, man,” Felix sputtered, scooting backward on the carpet.  
“Calm down.”

“You want me to calm down?” Pierre shouted, his head whipping back so that he could glare at me. “After I just saw you about to fuck my best friend? Nuh-uh, buddy. Hell fucking no.”

He turned his back me, and my stomach dropped as he moved toward Felix again.

“Stop!”

Before I knew what I was doing, my hands were around Pierre’s neck, and I smashed him against the opposite shelf. His eyes were wide, piercing mine.

Ringed with tears.

“Show him, Kat,” he seethed, putting his arms up against the shelf as if he knew he was guilty of something far worse than physical assault. “Show him who you love more.”

As if he were guilty of murder.

I looked back at Felix, who was cautiously picking himself up from the floor. He held his shirt up to his face to block the blood, but it was already running in strong streams down his neck.

“Show him,” Pierre repeated, almost begging. Because the only way to end Felix’s suffering, both of their suffering, was to do as Pierre wanted. Of the three of us, maybe they didn’t know it, but I was the one who was hurting the most. I couldn’t take it anymore.

Looking Felix dead in the eyes, I mouthed the words, I’m sorry.

By the time I turned back to face Pierre, his hands had fallen to his waist, and his own waist was bare, his cock freed.

“Show him.”

“No,” I said, trying to sound firm even though my whole body was shaking. “Not until you tell me where you went.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does,” I hissed at him, and pushed harder back against the shelf. His eyes were frigid, and yet, I could feel the rage burning within him, hotter than hell itself. He was hurting bad. “Tell me.”

He shook his head like a child, a weak attempt to remain strong himself, steady in his own choice. He wouldn’t tell me. Not until I proved myself to him. Not until I did for him what I was going to do for Felix, for Elliot, for Leo.

Until I proved that he was equal to, if not, better than all three of them.

Letting out a long breath, my hand drifted down to his member, where it perked up at my touch. With slow movements, my fingers wrapped around his cock, and began carefully rubbing up, and down, up, and down, as if I were stroking his head, trying to calm him down as if he’d seen a ghost. In a way, perhaps this was his worst nightmare—and it had come true.

My eyes had been closed for a moment as we had gotten a rhythm going, but when I opened my eyes, it wasn’t me he was looking at. It was Felix. Turning my head, to my horror, I saw that he had stood up and was walking toward us. Glancing back at Pierre, I saw his gaze sharpen. In that split second, afraid for what he might do next, I removed my hand from his cock and grabbed onto his shoulders, pulling him over me. My back slammed against the shelf, and now, it was him who had me fixed to one spot.

“I love you,” he whispered again. A few hours ago, I might’ve appreciated the constant words of affection. But right now, they just sounded desperate. Overkill. “You know that, Kat. You know I love you.”

“Does she?” Felix said. The comment was dripping with sarcasm. He meant to make Pierre angrier. “Maybe you should say it louder.”

Looking over Pierre’s shoulder, I saw him standing directly across from us, leaning nonchalantly against the shelf as if he didn’t care that Pierre was creating this spectacle, as if he didn’t care that he’d just gotten mauled in the face.

The comments didn’t work. Pierre continued to face me. For a long moment, his eyes locked with mine.

I just wanted this to be over.

Letting him know I was ready, I moved my hips forward, inviting him toward me. Feeling the pressure of his cock against my pussy, he inched forward a little more, dipping a little deeper inside of me.

I was used to the feeling by now, and as he started fucking, I barely noticed my back rising against the shelf, his dick parting my legs with each stroke. My attention was elsewhere—on Felix as he pulled up his pants, flung his coat over his shoulders, and walked toward the elevator. Just as I was reaching my climax, I heard the elevator door ding, and there was a shuffling of steps before the doors closed.

I let out a gasp, grabbing onto Pierre’s hair. His face buried into my neck as his hips gave one final thrust, sending my body quivering as I collapsed onto him, my arms hooked over his shoulders. In a wave of exhaustion, my head dropped back against the row of books cushioning my head.

“Hey!”

Pierre pulled out faster than I would’ve liked, leaving me to scramble away from him and throw my hands over my waist.

“You aren’t supposed to be up here!”

Fuck.

With one rough movement, I yanked my panties back up, and rushed to grab my pants from the floor just as I caught a glimpse of the intruder. It was the kid from the front desk. I couldn’t help but squeal a bit in laughter as he froze just feet away from the elevator. Something told me this was his first night on the job.

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“Um ...” He gulped, and started backing away toward the elevator. “You guys have to leave. Library’s closed.”

“So it is,” Pierre responded, zipping up his pants.

With that, the kid hurried back into the elevator, and the doors closed as soon as he entered.

Once we were alone again, Pierre turned to face me.

“Now Felix knows how it feels,” he muttered, reaching up with his arm wipe the tears from his eyes. “How I feel.”

Shaking my head, I slipped my pants back over my legs, and tugged my coat tight around me. Then I crossed my arms over my chest. In the dim lighting, I had to step close enough to him so that the toes of our shoes met in order to see him. For a moment, I just stood there, face to face with my best friend, my partner in crime, my other half in so many ways.

I couldn’t worry about Felix. Not now.

I did what I did for one reason, and one reason only. It had nothing to do with me, and everything to do with Pierre.

“Are you happy now?” I asked, my voice coming out cold.

I stared into him, unblinking. The ball was in his court, and the question was genuine.

He wasn't going to answer me. Not now, not ever. I could feel it.

He was ashamed of what he did. Like punching Tommy, it was a spur of the moment thing, an instinctual act, something his body did, not him. Without speaking, that's what he was saying to me. That was his defense.

But I knew it was much deeper than that.

"Yeah," I said before walking past him. "You should feel ashamed

"Wait."

Pierre grabbed my arm, pulling me back to him. The action was aggressive, and I snapped my arm away from him, pulling it tight to my chest.

"Don't fucking touch me," I growled, and started to turn away from him again. But then, at the last moment, I whipped back around to face him. "I can't keep going through life making choices based on what you want. Being your friend is like walking on fucking eggshells, everywhere I go, you know that, right?"

I was shouting at him now, jabbing my finger toward him. I was pissed, and I wanted him to know it.

"You knew I was involved with Felix, and the others," I continued, trying and failing to calm my tone of voice. "If anything, it was them I was cheating on, not you. I'm allowed to fuck around with whoever I want. And you can't decide that for me."

Pierre stood still, so silent that if I didn't know he was right in front of me, I wouldn't have realized he was there at all. He stepped back, and his silhouette blended into the shadows.



Taking in a deep breath, I tried to look at the situation from his point of view. Considering his overall mental state, of course it'd make him upset to literally see me with someone else.

But just because we both had beef with the same group of people didn't mean he had to act out in the way he did.

"Look," I said, lowering my voice as I let out a heavy sigh. "Here's the thing. I want to be with you, Pierre. I do." I paused, wondering if I was telling the truth. For now, it might as well have been. "But if you want me, you're going to have to accept Elliot. And Leo. And Felix."

"I'm sorry," he replied, his voice gravelly, choked up. I felt him stepping past me. "I don't know if I can do that."

This time, it was my turn to hold him back.

"Then you at least have to start being honest with me," I said. "I've been honest with you. I've told you about Felix, about the others. About what happened to me." I could feel his arm relaxing in my grip. "Now you have to tell me about where the hell you've been, and why you were here."

"You could tell me the same thing," he retorted, and stepped closer to me. "Why you were both here."

"I'll show you why," I muttered, reaching into my pocket for my phone. After a moment of scrounging around, I still couldn't find the damn thing. "Fuck. I must've dropped it somewhere around here."

"Hm."

I looked at Pierre. “I got a text from some number I didn’t recognize. Whoever sent it told me to come here at this time.”

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Pierre was silent and it was bothering me. Why couldn't he just open his fucking mouth?

"Your turn," I said, crossing my arms. "Tell me why you're here."

"You still didn't explain why Felix was here," he pointed out.

Shaking my head, I let out a ragged breath. He was really pushing my buttons, here. "Because," I started, wishing we could do this somewhere other the musty top floor of a college library. "I didn't want to come here alone. I thought it might have something to do with ... Tommy."

He didn't know it, but I was about to say Vivian's name instead of her cousin's.

"I guess there's something else I have to tell you," I said. "Tommy has a cousin, Vivian. She's—well, she used to be my roommate." This was going to be hard for him to wrap his head around, and I knew it. I wished we could just calm down, chill out, go back to his apartment and laugh things off like we used to do. But he wouldn't let this slide. Maybe it was for the better. "She and her friends are out to get me. If it weren't for Elliot, for the others, then she might've gotten to me. She hates my guts. I don't know why, but—"

"Wait." Pierre laid his hands on my shoulders. "So ... you're saying that they're helping you? It's not just ..."

"It's mutual," I said, and wanted to facepalm myself right then and there. "I mean, it's complicated. Look, the thing is, I think whoever sent that text is somehow

connected to Vivian. I just know it.”

I thought about waiting for him to connect the dots, but I didn’t have the patience for it. Didn’t have the patience more confusion, more doubt.

“I didn’t want to be alone,” I continued. “And you left, so... I called him. Asked him to come with me. That’s it.”

“I don’t understand.” Pierre ran a hand nervously through his hair, and glanced over his shoulder as if to make sure we weren’t being overheard. “Why would she text you?”

“She?”

The question caught him off guard.

“Pierre,” I said, placing the palms of my hands on his wrists, which were still on my shoulders, holding me in place. “Who are you talking about?”

He let out a long, trembling sigh.

“Remember when you were talking about Cassidy? And what she said to you?”

I nodded slowly. Was she the one who sent the text? Maybe she was after Pierre’s ass after all.

“Well, she was right.” He sucked in another breath. “I am seeing someone. Someone else. You probably don’t know her.”

“Surprise me.”

That's when Pierre took out his own phone, and started rifling through his text messages.

But instead of telling me a name, or showing me a number, or a text, he shoved a photo in my face.

"You know her?" he asked, as if he were a detective interrogating me about a victim. It took me a moment to realize who that was, the girl with the long black hair and heavy makeup. I had nearly forgotten about her, about who she was. I couldn't have given a shit about who she was fucking and why.

But that changed in a split second.

"Her name's Luna," he said, and the smile I heard in his voice made me sick. "We met online, and she gave me her number. The other day she told me she'd be able to meet up with me, so we exchanged numbers. She must've mistyped my number and sent it to you before sending it to me."

Luna. Vivian's friend. Just as much of a bitch and just as hot—in a fake way. She had accompanied me and Vivian to our first party at Freeman, where I had stumbled into Elliot and realized Eric wasn't the one for me.

Pretty on the outside, nasty within. Not right for Pierre on any level.

"Our numbers are completely different," I said, rolling my eyes. "Well, similar. But she must've sent this to me on purpose."

"Why would she do that?"

"Because she knows exactly who I am," I replied, stepping past him. "Come on. We should go."

“Wait.” Turning on the flashlight on his phone, Pierre went searching through the dark and located my own phone. He handed it back to me. “How does she know you?”

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“Because she’s friends with Vivian.” I punched the elevator button. “And she gets the same amusement out of torturing me.”

The elevator doors dinged open, and I hurried inside, pressing the button for the ground floor the second we entered.

“Are you sure?” Pierre asked. In the full, bright elevator lighting, his face looked even worse than it had when I saw him lying bloody on the ground in the middle of that crowd of students. “I mean, she seems really nice when I talk to her. She’s actually pretty sweet. I was going to tell you about her, I swear, but ...”

“But then I agreed to fuck you?” I glared at him. “So, which one of us was the second option?”

Pierre shook his head. “It’s not like that, Kat. It’s just—”

“So, I’m not allowed to go fuck around, but you are?” I said. “And she’s okay with that?”

I didn’t care if he was in love with Vivian’s best friend. If that’s what he wanted, that’s what he wanted. Who knew, maybe the bitch had changed. But I needed to set the record straight with him.

“Just to be clear,” I said, keeping my attention glued to the screen counting down the floor numbers, “she’s not who you think she is. I don’t know Luna well, but I do know that she’s buddies with Vivian. And I can’t let them get to you, too.”

As soon as the elevator doors opened, I stepped out without waiting for him.

“She was supposed to meet me here,” Pierre said, scurrying out behind me. The whole first floor of the library was empty, save for the kid at the reception desk. He tried to avert his gaze from us as we passed, and I almost felt bad for him. “That’s why I was there. Look, Kat, I’m sorry. Okay? I’m sorry about everything.”

“It’s fine.”

He still didn’t tell me about Tommy, and where the fuck he went, why the fuck he abandoned me in his apartment after I told him his homework client nearly raped me.

Yeah, everything was fine. Just great.

I burst through the doors, and barely felt the cold night air when it hit me. My thoughts had shifted from Pierre’s deepest secrets to something more important.

Felix.

I just hoped he was okay, that he didn’t take it personally, despite the fact that everything Pierre did was personal.

And then again, I could imagine Felix saying that he deserved it. And maybe he’d be right.

One punch, versus years of humiliation.

Guess it wasn’t the most horrible thing to have done. I’d gotten my rage out though fucking him, fucking them all. Pierre got his chance to take it out on them through a raised fist. I couldn’t hold this against him.



“Hey,” I breathed, turning back to face him. I had been speed-walking away from the library as fast as possible, Pierre trailing behind like a puppy. He bumped right into me. “I’m the one who should be sorry.”

“Why?”

“Because,” I said, shrugging. “I’m acting like a bitch and you don’t deserve it.”

Pierre’s lips fell into a sideways smirk, and I mirrored it, reaching up to ruffle his hair.

“Well, maybe a little,” I said, turning around to lead him back across the quad, as if I was the one who went to school here.

“I didn’t go to Tommy.”

I paused, and waited, keeping my gaze on the row of buildings in the distance, the city lights gleaming, not so far away as they seemed.

“When I walked out of the apartment,” he continued softly, coming to stand beside me, close enough for me to feel his warmth. He refrained from putting his arm around me. “I know what you think of me. That I’m unstable. Destructive, maybe. And you’re right.”

I looked at him. His cheeks were turning rosy in the harsh wind, and wisps of his hair blew in the air like loose feathers. He was beautiful.

“I am those things. But I’m trying to change, Kat.” He turned his face to mine, and then his hands were on my arms, holding me close. “I didn’t go to Tommy. I just ... went out. Went to that fountain, and forced myself to think. I guess I just needed to be alone.”

His forehead was pressed against mine, and as he spoke, his breath curled up like smoke in the cold air. I didn't mind. I breathed it in, savoring it.

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“I shouldn’t have run out like that. It was stupid.”

“Yeah,” I couldn’t help saying. “It was.”

I felt Pierre smile, and a moment later, he planted a soft kiss on my forehead. Then, his lips fluttered down the bridge of my nose until they landed on my own lips. I tilted my head, giving him all my breath in that one, slow kiss, before he pulled away—well, not really pulled away. His lips still lingered on mine, just barely, just enough.

“Are you doing okay?” I asked, thinking back to what he had told me about Luna. “I mean, from what I know, that chick you’re dating is still in the US.”

He snorted. “Yeah. About that ...” He sucked in a deep breath. “I feel so stupid.”

“It’s not your fault,” I said, guiding him back across the grass. His arm looped around my waist as we walked. “You got catfished. So, what—how were you supposed to know who she really was?”

“I don’t know,” he said quietly. “But I feel like I should’ve.”

We came to the edge of the sidewalk where the shuttle stop was. I looked up at him.

“How come?” I asked, narrowing my eyes. “Did she tell you something?”

Pierre shook his head. I wanted to believe that he was telling the truth for once—but he said nothing.

I'd let it slide. Just one more time.

The shuttle came rumbling a few yards past where we stood, and the small group of students that had formed around us started walking toward it. We followed, hanging a bit behind the rest of the group, watching as a few students filed out the bus one by one. I wondered what their stories were, why they were out just as late as we were, whether they had been abandoned at a party by their friends, or were coming back from a late shift. Maybe, like me, they were from other schools, here to meet up with significant others that didn't exist, friends that were about to break their hearts.

Or maybe they were just normal. And I was unlucky.

"Kat?" Pierre said. The line had disappeared into the shuttle, and I was standing alone, my mind in another world. "You coming?"

"Yeah," I said, shaking away the thoughts. I was tired. Just fucking exhausted—couldn't wait to get back home.

Back to my real home.

We rode back to his apartment complex in a dreamy silence. My head found its way onto his shoulder after we finished bumping along some old cobblestone street, and I had almost gone to sleep by the time we arrived. I almost wanted to ask Pierre to carry me inside, but I regained some sanity by the time it came to actually leaving the bus.

"You're so cute when you're sleeping," Pierre whispered into my ear as we entered the building. I almost elbowed him in the gut for that.

"Don't say that shit," I yawned, pressing the elevator button. "So, what are we doing tomorrow?"

“Anything you want,” Pierre replied, allowing me to enter the elevator before him. Once the doors had closed behind us, he leaned in toward me, and his lips started toying with my earlobe.

“Fish n chips?” I giggled, playfully pushing his face away.

“I said anything.”

“We should start thinking about how you’re getting back to the US with me,” I replied.

The doors opened up to reveal Pierre’s hallway. We stepped out, and once we reached his door, Pierre responded, “Yeah, about that ...”

He waved the key over the door handle, and the door clicked open for us.

“What?” I asked. “You don’t wanna come anymore?”

We entered the apartment, and I immediately headed for the bed. I’d save brushing my teeth for the morning. I was beat.

“No, I do,” he said, peeling off his jacket. “I’m just worried about—”

“Don’t worry,” I said, taking off my own coat and throwing it to the floor. Once my shoes were kicked off, I settled under the covers. “Don’t worry about anything anymore. Let me do all the worrying.”

I could hear him laughing softly as he the lights turned out. A moment later, he jumped onto the bed beside me, and wrapped his arm over my body, snuggling in close.

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“Sweet dreams,” he murmured, kissing the back of my neck.

“You too, P,” I replied.

There was no way he’d get a ticket for tomorrow night, but I’d make sure we booked him something before I left. I couldn’t guarantee that things would be perfect when he returned home, but I could make sure that by the time he arrived that I’d clear the air with the boys. Let them know that they would have to do what they knew how to do best—share.

It was Elliot I was most worried about.

Pierre started snoring in my ear after a few minutes had passed, and I reached for my phone to set an alarm. I wasn’t going to come all the way to London and miss out on some good street food and culture. Maybe we could head to a museum before lunch.

When I looked at my screen, there was a text from Felix.

Hey, he wrote. Just letting u know, I’m not gonna be coming back to N. Carolina. My dad needs me here for something.

Drawing my eyebrows together, I stared at the message for a few seconds before typing back, What do you mean, you’re not coming back? What about school?

He responded almost right away.

I’m taking a leave, he said. I don’t know how long I’ll be gone. Maybe a few days. Or

a week.

I felt a pit in my stomach, and wanted to ignore it. But I couldn't deny it any longer. I felt something—something more toward him, something that made me want to be near him.

Before Pierre had appeared in the library, I was ready. I was ready to have Felix to myself, all to myself.

I had wanted him so bad.

Ok, I wrote back. Do the others know?

I waited a moment for his reply, but he must've walked away from his phone or gotten distracted. I turned off my phone, and stuffed it under my pillow.

One breath in, one breath out.

Tomorrow would be a good day. For Pierre, I'd make it good.

“Just one good day,” I whispered to him, wondering if he could hear me. “I promise.”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 5:15 am*

Like the first morning, I woke up to the muffled sounds of the street below, and warm sunlight. It seemed like Pierre had gotten up before the alarm, because it went off a few seconds after I sat up and put my feet on the floor.

With a groan, I scoured for my phone under the pillows, and turned off the alarm. After rubbing at the corners of my eyes, I looked around for Pierre.

“There’s a free concert in Hyde Park,” his voice came from the bathroom. I realized the water had been running, and now that he turned it off, I smelled his sweet shampoo circulating through the steam from the shower. A second later, he poked his head out from the door, his hair uncombed and sopping wet. “It starts in like an hour. So get your ass out of bed.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I yawned, raising my arms for a good stretch. “What kind of music?”

“Jazz.”

I smiled, and pushed myself up from the mattress. He knew me so well.

About twenty minutes went by before the both of us were bundled up in our coats and scarves, ready to brave the windy London weather. According to Pierre, it was going to rain around noon, so we’d go duck into a restaurant or pub and eat something there.

We took the tube south toward Hyde Park, snuggled up close together on the hard plastic seats. While Pierre spent the whole ride pointing out every bit of our surroundings, I just listened quietly, soaking it all in, relishing in the sound of his



voice and its enthusiasm, which was so rare.

But in spite of my best efforts to get lost in the history of the city that Pierre held so dear, my thoughts turned to Elliot. I didn't want to admit it to myself, but I missed him—the slight rasp in his voice, his silky curls and the fierce look in his gaze. His touch. His scent.

I wanted to see him so bad.

By the time we climbed up the escalator to the park, my mind had turned to something else. Pierre must've noticed my unusual silence, because he hopped in front of me and laid his hands on my shoulders. I had no choice but to look into his eyes.

“Hey,” he said with a slight smile. “Is something wrong?”

I wanted to snort at the question and provide him with some half-assed sarcastic answer, like, Oh, nothing, nothing at all. Just everything that happened in the past few days, and how it's been slowly, painfully eating away at my insides.

“I was just thinking about Luna,” I said with a sigh, mirroring his reassuring grin. “Like, are you still going to talk to her, or ...”

Pierre shook his head, squeezing my shoulders in his hands. “Hell no, Kat. She's nothing to me now. I was stupid to believe that she was real.”

“She is real,” I said, raising an eyebrow. Pierre shook his head.

“You know what I mean,” he replied, his grin falling lopsided. I reached up to push his bangs back from his forehead. “Not real, as in, not genuine. I got catfished. It happens.”

“I know,” I said, and linked my arm within his. We started walking toward the music. “It just seems like a huge coincidence that you, of all people, would end up talking to her.”

Pierre remained silent after that comment.

“How’d you guys meet online, anyway?” I prodded. “I mean, I know you’re not going to go ghost, but you never exactly seemed like a fan of online dating.”

“You’re right,” he said. “I hate social media. But I happened to open up my Instagram and saw a follow request from her. I was like, what the hell. She’s cute. And I’m lonely as fuck.”

“And you were on Instagram, because...?”

“To check up on you,” he answered, grinning at me. “Why else?”

Shaking my head, I looked toward the group of people forming in front of us and smiled. “Stalker.”

Pierre gave me a light jab in the ribcage for that, but it’s something I deserved, for one thing or another.

We settled down onto the concrete along with a dozen or so other people. The concert had been in full swing for a few minutes, but only now it seemed that other people, like us, were just making their way to the open venue. Within minutes, I had lost myself in the alto sax and keyboard, the streaming rhythm of the high hat. It was a little more upbeat than I was used to, but I was loving it.

“These dudes are great,” I said, leaning in to Pierre. But I caught something out of the corner of my eye. He hadn’t seemed to hear what I said. Over his shoulder, I saw he

was typing something on his phone. I couldn't tell who it was, but I caught sight of the last couple of texts.

And my gut froze.

Don't listen to what she says, wrote the sender. She's manipulative.

Says you, was all Pierre wrote in response.

She?

Who were they talking about?

At that second, he must've sensed my attention lingering there, because he switched off his phone and slid under his thigh. Smiling, he craned his neck to look at my face. "Did you say something, babe?"

"Don't call me babe," I said, trying to maintain a positive air. "Babe."

"Nice," Pierre laughed, shifting his eyes back to the performers.

About twenty minutes in, it started to drizzle. While others started rolling up their beach towels and packing up their picnics, Pierre and I remained. The rain wasn't heavy, at least not yet, and without saying it, both of us knew we wanted to milk this moment for what it was worth.

The band seemed to have taken notice of the fact that we were the only couple left still giving them the attention they deserved. The main guitarist nodded to the percussionist, and the group started playing something that sounded more like a pop ballad than off-beat jazz. Pierre jumped up to his feet, and extended a hand toward me.

His eyes were dazzling and bright—how could I resist? I took his hand, allowing him to awkwardly hoist me up.

"Don't tell me you don't know this song," Pierre said, grabbing onto my shoulders.

His smile was contagious, and I could only shake my head and laugh. “What? Come on.”

“I don’t listen to indie rock shit,” I said, shaking my head as he intertwined his fingers with my right hand. “You know that.”

“Well, now you will,” he said, his other hand holding my waist. We started swaying, the rain droplets falling around us, missing us, as if by dancing we were able to ward off the elements of Mother Nature. A little self-conscious, I craned my neck to see if anyone was watching. But all of the concert-goers had fled because of the rain, and the only people left around us were yards away, ordering food from street vendors or rushing past under the hoods of their umbrellas. The musicians themselves were busy having fun, forming their alternative riffs to the song, laughing amongst each other.

Pierre was the only one watching me. And even he could barely do that as he held me closer, close enough to whisper in my ear.

“You’re my kind of woman,” he purred, his lips brushing against my ear. I wanted to tell him I loved him, right then and there. That he was the perfect one for me. That he deserved the world. “And only mine.”

I knew that was far from the truth. But maybe that was what he wanted to hear.

“I love you,” I whispered back.

Except, Pierre didn’t hear it. The rain started pouring in heavy currents, and the music was gone in an instant as the musicians scrambled to pack up their things. We didn’t have the time to talk as we rushed back toward the street in search of shelter.

Oh, well.

Maybe it was for the better.

The next few hours went by in a warm haze. We ate British fast food until it felt like our stomachs would explode before heading back to Pierre's place to gather up my things. I hadn't brought much to begin with, but we still struggled to locate every personal item of mine. I had strewn my toiletries, socks, ear-pods, and everything else all over the place as if I had moved in for the year rather than a couple of days.

Pierre had arranged for a taxi service to come pick me up and bring me to the airport. Meanwhile, we planned Pierre's trip back home.

"Are you sure it's okay for me to stay with you and your mom?" he asked, scrolling mindlessly up and down the page of the airline's website. "Won't it be a little cramped?"

"Cramped? Are you kidding?" I shook my head at him. "Did you forget that you practically lived in my mom's apartment for the better half of senior year? I don't think she gives a shit, honestly."

"True, true," Pierre said. His eyes fell to the gift card lying on the kitchen table, where we had sat down. "Shame."

"What is?"

"This," he said, picking up the card and turning it between his index finger and thumb. "Shame that we didn't use it all."

"It wasn't meant to be used by me," I said. "You can use it for meals, now. Which, come to think of it, is kinda silly considering it's a five-star restaurant. A gift card for some supermarket would've made more sense."

“Guess he didn’t have to spend the money,” Pierre remarked. “Considering his dad owns the place. For him, it’s cheaper than a bodega.”

I snorted at the comment. “I guess.”

We were silent for a moment, and I glanced at my phone. We only had about thirty more minutes together before the car came for me.

“Hey,” I said, leaning across the table toward him, folding down the screen of his laptop as I did so. He had been avoiding eye contact with me ever since we started planning his flight. I could tell he was nervous. “How did you know about ... the fact that I’m sort of with the three of them? Did Luna tell you?”

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He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter, Kat.”

I thought about the person he had been texting during the concert in the park. It could’ve been anyone, really—my sense of trust was so plagued by uncertainty at this point. I felt the need to second-guess every person I came into direct contact with. Cassidy proved me right—she had appeared at first to be some sweet do-gooder, when it turned out that she was really dating Pierre’s abusive bully-slash-Vivian’s cousin. Just as evil.

With a shrug, I settled back into my chair and tapped on the screen of my phone. Two minutes had passed.

Maybe it was best to just change the subject.

“I still have to bleach your hair, you know,” I said, meeting Pierre’s gaze with a smirk. “And dye it.”

“Oh, yeah,” he said, getting up from his chair. He went into the bathroom, then came back a second later holding the two shades of dye. “Do we have enough time to do it now?”

“Hell no,” I said, laughing. “But put those in your suitcase right now so that you remember to bring it.” Running my fingers through my own waves, I added, “I think I need to do some touching up myself.”

“You could try a different color,” Pierre suggested, tossing the bottles of dye into his open suitcase like it was a basketball hoop.



“And ruin my signature look? I don’t know, man,” I said, standing up from the table. Moving over to his closet, I grabbed my coat, and started sliding it over my arms. “I don’t think you’d be able to recognize me.”

“You? Unrecognizable?” Pierre strode over to me, and before I could pull on the coat all the way, he had his arms around my waist and his nose was nuzzling mine. “Never.”

“You sound so sure about that,” I said, sounding a little more pensive than I wanted to admit. I was thinking out loud—after all, what if, over the course of the summer, I had changed? Just because I had been keeping in contact with Pierre over the phone didn’t mean my personality had stayed firm. The other three boys brought something else out of me. So much had happened back home, and Pierre was barely a part of it.

Or, was he?

“It’s because I am.” Pierre moved his face back from mine, just enough to allow me to see his eyes moving between mine. “Nothing will ever get in the way of our friendship, Kat. You know that, right?”

I nodded, unsure of what to say. It wasn’t a fact. That was his way of looking at things—of course, thousands of things could get in the way of our friendship. Including a certain somebody named Vivian Russo.

Or Elliot Lancaster.

“Right,” I finally said, smiling. “Nothing.”

Pierre regarded me for a moment longer as if to make sure I was being honest. When he seemed convinced, he raised his hands to my shoulders and started pushing back the fabric of my coat.

“Why are you in such a hurry? We still got, like, twenty minutes.”

“Oh, yeah?” I giggled, and let out a short gasp as his hand drifted down my back toward my ass. So, he had learned to be a little more forward over the past couple days. “And what are we supposed to do for twenty minutes?”

“Anything,” he said, just as the coat dropped to the floor. Stepping forward, he guided me to the wall. “Everything.”

“Sounds nice,” I replied, a little absent-mindedly as his right hand found its way to the seam of my sweatpants. “Make it quick.”

His fingers dipped past the fabric.

But just as he leaned in toward me for a kiss, the sound of a car horn blasted from outside. Quickly, Pierre removed his hand from my pants and hurried to the window, moving aside the curtain to peer outside.

“Shit,” he said, turning back to me. “Did we get the time wrong? I think that’s your ride.”

“Seriously?” Furrowing my brows, I joined him at the window and looked outside to find the stout black vehicle, bug-like circular headlights marking itself as a cab. Yup. That was me. “You’re right.”

And here I was, about to get a little finger-fucking in before a long-ass flight. Oh, well.

“Here,” Pierre said, handing me my coat. I slipped it on as Pierre went to find his own coat and shoes in order to walk me outside. What a gentleman. Even though I’d see him again in a few days, I already missed him. Something had changed between us

within the past few days—in obvious, more physical ways, yes, but also emotionally. There was a cloud of suspicion between us, as if neither of us could be sure that the other was telling the truth. I hated that. We never used to be this way.

And most of all, I missed him because some part of me was scared that when the time came, he'd go back on his decision. That he'd refund the airplane ticket for himself and end up staying behind.

“You ready?” Pierre said, unlocking the door. I nodded, and followed him out of the hallway.

We made it down the elevator to the lobby in silence—a sad silence. The past few days had meant to be a fun, light-hearted affair. Sure, I wanted to amends with him, work through some of the things going on in his mind. His suicide attempt was not something I would take lightly—and I planned on addressing that further. I just didn't want to overwhelm him.

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Now, I regretted not taking the time to be frank with him. To tell him how much pain it had caused me, knowing he had tried to take his own life because of something I did.

It made my stomach churn.

How could he have done something like that to me?

“Hey,” Pierre said, nudging my arm as we stepped out of the elevator. “You okay?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I’m fine. Thanks.” We exited the building, and before leaving his side, we turned to each other. I gave him a warm smile, taking his hands in my own. “Promise you’ll come, okay?”

“I promise,” he replied, his eyes moving around my face, as if he were documenting each and every curve, every shadow, to keep with him for when I left. “Call me when you get back, okay?”

“Of course.”

We leaned toward one another. Even though I wanted to hold him tight, stroke his hair and let my tongue linger with his, we made the kiss short and sweet. Pierre pulled back first, and gave me a shove toward the car.

“See you in a few days,” he said, giving me a small wave. “Safe travels.”

“Thanks,” I said, turning away to step into the car. The taxi driver got out to hoist my

suitcase into the trunk as I settled into the leather seat.

Even as the car pulled away, I could see Pierre still standing there in the side mirror, could feel his gaze on mine. And I knew we'd find a way. We had to.

We were in this together.

All five of us, whether we liked it or not.

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The second I got back to my dorm room, I heard my bed calling my name. I must have slept for half of the next day, because by the time I had woken up, someone was knocking on my door like the world was ending.

“Kat! Get the fuck up,” someone shouted from the hallway. Leo.

With a groan, I lumbered out of bed, and grimaced at my body. I hadn’t even changed out of my clothes from the day before, and my suitcase was left unopened in the middle of the room.

Leo started banging on the door again. I wanted to tell him to fuck off, but at the same time, I was excited to see him again.

“Okay, okay,” I said, unlocking the door to find not just him. Elliot was there, too. It looked like they’d set up camp in the hallway, as if they had been waiting since dawn to revel in my presence. I snorted at the thought. And yet, they had sleeping bags under their arms.

My eyes went first to Elliot. He stood back a bit from the door. Rather than giving me a little room to breathe, however, he seemed to be shy about seeing me again. He felt ashamed, I could feel it—ashamed of how he’d treated me the last time we saw one another.

Whatever. I was over it.

“She’s alive!” Leo exclaimed, wrestling me back into the room. I had to practically push him off before falling back against my desk.

“Calm down, puppy dog,” I muttered, steadying myself and wiping the sleep from my eyes. Still, I was smiling as I said it. It felt weird to say, but seeing the two of them again felt like I had officially returned home.

“Calm down? Hell no,” he said, draping his arms over my shoulders so that he was almost hanging on to me for support. His bright eyes consumed my entire span of attention. “Kat Silver, you’re my drug. I need you. Withdrawal got me fucked these past two days.”

“Shut up,” I laughed, pushing him off me, turning to face Elliot. Just as always, he made himself appear dark and nonchalant, as if he couldn’t give a shit that we were coming face to face again. It made me want to punch him, and yet, I had to admit it gave him this extra layer of hotness—you just couldn’t help but be attracted to that sort of demeanor. I hated it.

“Hey,” he said, putting on a smirk. It’s like he knew his persona was getting to me. “You’re back.”

“I’m back,” I repeated, crossing my arms, giving myself the chance to look him up and down. Maybe it was just the fact that I hadn’t seen him, but for some reason, he looked ten times better than I had imagined him to be when he spoke to me over the phone. I nodded at his arm. “New tattoo?”

His right forearm was bound in some kind of bandage. He nodded. “Yeah. I think you’ll like it.”

“Oh, yeah?” I asked, my mouth curling up at the corners. Couldn’t help it. I took a slow step toward him. “Why’s that?”

He shrugged, still not budging from the door. If I wanted something, I had to come to him. That was the unspoken etiquette of his. Fucking macho prick.

“Because,” he murmured, waiting for me to come toe to toe with him. “It’s sexy.”

I scoffed at that, rolling my eyes. “Right,” I said, giving him a little push. “Should’ve figured.”

Suddenly, I felt Leo’s arms wrap around me, and he pulled me away from Elliot.

“So, what’s the verdict? London good, London bad?” he said, his cheek squished against mine.

“London okay,” I said, rolling my eyes at his baby voice. “Beats Raleigh, at any rate.”

“Oh, really?” Elliot said, finally stepping inside the room, dropping his sleeping bag onto the floor. “Is that because of the people, or the place?”

“The food.” I freed myself from Leo’s hold and went to close the door. “And memories.”

That last comment seemed to cut into Elliot a little more deeply than I thought it would. I had expected him to laugh it off, or ignore it altogether, but the look he shot me was more than empathetic. There was a flash of anger in his eyes, as if he was upset that I dared keep referring to the worst four years of my life.

“What?” I said, raising my eyebrows at him. “It’s true.”

When he said nothing, I shook my head, and leaned back against the door. I didn’t understand why he couldn’t just ask me how I was, like a normal boyfriend. A normal person. I mean, wasn’t he happy to see me?

Leo didn’t seem to have any trouble showing his feelings. It wasn’t much to ask.



“Anyway,” I said, nodding to the sleeping bags. Leo had also brought his backpack, but it was way too bloated to be stuffed with books. “What’s all this about?”

Leo looked to Elliot, who only shrugged, as if to say, You wanna explain?

“Wait,” Leo said, shutting his eyes before giving Elliot a hard stare. “You didn’t tell her?”

Fuck.

With a long sigh, I put a hand to my temple, and waited for an explanation. Just when I thought my life couldn't get any more interesting, it became a fucking circus.

When would it stop?

Elliot let out a breath and leaned back against the wall, facing me. "We were wondering if we could stay with you over break." He bit his lip, a slight sign of nervousness. "If that's okay," he added.

"Why?" I asked.

Elliot looked like he was too hesitant to say anything more. With a sigh, Leo hopped onto my bed as if he were ready for a long talk, sleepover-style.

"Fine. Since he's being a pussy, I'll explain," he said. "You know how Elliot's been living with his dad?"

I nodded.

Before continuing, he looked toward Elliot, as if to gain his permission to continue. It was about to get personal.

"There's an issue with his mom," Leo continued slowly. "She's ... uh, help me out, here, Ell. Can't you speak for yourself?"

“I agree.” I glared at Elliot. “Get over yourself. I want to hear whatever this is from the horse’s mouth.”

Rolling his eyes, Elliot drew in a deep breath and crossed his arms. “Whatever. My dad’s been hitting her. So, I tried to put an end to it.”

I could only look at him.

What the fuck was I supposed to do, other than listen and wait for him to come clean?

“Last night. He started again. He was drunk, you know. I couldn’t take it anymore. So, I used this,” he explained, his fragmented sentences bearing more depth than he realized. With a careful movement, he rolled the bandage off his forearm to reveal a beautiful, ornate print of a dagger. The skin was still glossy.

He snorted as he looked at it, then covered the tattoo back up.

“I mean, it wasn’t a fucking dagger. But I raised a knife at him. What else did he expect me to do? Stand back and watch?” He laughed, a harsh, dark laugh filled with hurt more than hate. “Stand back and watch him bully her? I’ve done that too many times before. So, I did what I had to do. He’s in some hospital in Raleigh. Don’t ask me where, because I couldn’t give a shit.”

I nodded, watching as his expression changed from frustration to embarrassment. He dipped his head, eyes cast to the floor, and let out a short cough. I stepped toward him, reaching out, and he allowed my hands to cradle his cheeks. When he didn’t flinch, I stroked the soft skin, feeling myself disappear in his watery, emerald gaze.

“I didn’t know about this,” I whispered, letting my hands fall to his neck, then his shoulders. I could feel his breaths, his pulse—on the outside, he seemed calm despite this sudden confession, but I could sense the rate of his heartbeat skyrocket. “Why

didn't you tell me?"

Again, he let out another snort, as if the answer was obvious. Of course, to him everything was. It was self-defense. Inside, I knew he was confused and his emotions were tangled.

"Because," he scoffed, "you'd assume shit about me. If I told you before, you'd think it's some kind of excuse."

"Excuse?" I narrowed my eyes at him. "For what?"

"For treating you like nothing," he muttered, his voice so low that I almost believed he was scared to say the words. "For doing the things I did."

I continued to hold him, giving him my full attention in case he wanted to share more. It made sense that he wouldn't have told me about this before. Elliot guarded his thoughts and feelings closely. I had come to accept that as part of his personality, an obstacle that I could work with, but fail to change.

Yet, what he told me seemed accurate. If he had told me this about this issue between his parents before, I might've dismissed it as just that—an excuse. It was a valid assumption to make. A damaged man yields a damaged son, who wreaks havoc on the world around him. Of course.

I might've seen it as Elliot asking for pity, when he deserved none.

"You're wrong," I said. "Dead wrong."

Without thinking, I pushed myself up on my tip-toes and planted a kiss on his lips. The contact was brief, but deep. When I pulled away, Elliot looked at me, as if bewildered I had reacted in that way, before putting his hand around the back of my

neck to return the kiss. I leaned into it, allowing him to taste a bit of my tongue, allowing myself a drink of his breath.

It tasted faintly of alcohol.

“I missed you,” Elliot breathed, pulling back at the sound of Leo clearing his throat. Turning his head to him, he said, “What’re you looking at, twink?”

The room went cold.

I looked toward Leo, who was reclined back on my bed, gazing at us. Then, I looked back at Elliot.

“What I’m looking at,” Leo started, “is a fucking horrible kiss.”

“Like you could do any better,” Elliot retorted.

I stepped back from Elliot and went to plop myself down on my desk chair. I wasn’t about to put up with a third fight over my ass.

“So, I know why you need a place to crash,” I said to Elliot, then shifted my attention to Leo. “But why are you here?”

Leo’s lips curled up at the corner, a devilish smirk.

“Well, it’s pretty simple, actually,” he said, shooting a wicked glance at Elliot. In comparison, I imagined him adding. “I can’t just have the two of you staying alone together, can I?”

“Guess not,” I replied. “Except, we wouldn’t be alone. I was planning on staying with my mom over break. I haven’t seen her since school started.”

That seemed to stun both of them. The boys looked at each other like they’d been caught sneaking out—or rather, sneaking into my own bedroom. But, hey, that was the truth.

“That doesn’t mean you have to change plans,” I continued. “My mom’s pretty chill. I’m just saying, though, you’ll be sleeping in the living room.”

“Of course,” Elliot said, regaining some composure. “Are you sure, though? Your mom and my family don’t exactly, well ...”

“Get along?” I shrugged. “It’s fine. It’s my choice to bring you guys. Plus ...” crossing my legs, I leaned forward, looking at Elliot, “It’ll give you the chance to piss off your father even more, if you know what I mean.” I gave him a wink.

“Yeah, I feel like pissing him off is the last thing I want to do,” he replied. “Or, the last thing I should do.”

“Either way, you’ll be pissing him off, right?” I said, realizing how similar this conversation sounded to the one I had with Pierre. Like Elliot, he was coming to stay with me in order to avoid his parents, and in doing so, he’d be sending them one message—I don’t need you anymore.

“Kat?” Leo said, snapping me out of my headspace. “Something wrong?”

God, he could read me easily. Too easily.

“Yeah,” I said quickly. “I mean, no. There’s something else you guys should know before you decide to stay over.”

There was no way for them to see this coming. Even I had to admit the whole situation was ridiculous. I could never expect the three of them to share the same space for half a second, let alone a few days. It was funny—I couldn’t see them getting mad about knowing I was fucking Pierre. They already knew he was into me. Of all the news I could’ve shared with them, this was the big kicker.

“Spit it out, Kitty Kat,” Elliot said, his tone smooth even though the words seemed harsh. “We can take it.”

I swallowed.

“I invited Pierre to come stay with me, too,” I said, the words hot on my tongue, dripping out of my lips like lava. I didn’t want to continue. “We planned it out before I came back. He’ll be here sometime early tomorrow morning.”

Leo put a hand up to his mouth, looking more amused than anything. Elliot, on the other hand, looked like he had been turned to stone.

“Look,” I said, wanting to avoid an awkward silence. “If this causes a problem, then—”

“Well, yeah, it kind of does,” Elliot growled, pushing himself away from the wall to step toward me. “He’s staying with you? Doesn’t he have his own house to sleep in?”

That got me angry. Mirroring his demeanor, I stood up from the chair, and walked toward him.

“He could ask you the same,” I said, my voice low, a borderline growl. When it came between my high school crush and my best friend, it shouldn’t have been a surprise to anyone that I would back Pierre. “Maybe you’re not the only one with a shitty household.”

That seemed to shut him up. He flicked his gaze over to Leo, then stalked back toward the door. It seemed like he was about to leave, but at the last second, he turned back around.

“So, it’s settled,” he said curtly. “The three of us will stay with you. Because what



choice do I have?”

The way he spoke made it sound like he was holding back an avalanche of swears, but I appreciated the effort. As a reward for trying to put on a happy face, I smiled at him.

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“It’s settled” I said, and turned to grin at Leo. He gave me a thumbs up. With that, I turned back to Elliot. “So,” I said, assuming a firm tone, “what about your mom? Is she still at your place?”

Elliot shook his head. “Hell no. She’s ... found somewhere else to stay,” he answered. “Thanks for asking.”

I turned to Leo. “Any updates on our favorite Freeman bitch?”

A big part of me wanted to believe that Luna’s attempt to catfish Pierre was just some petty game, something she did to entertain herself. But the skeptical side of me, the real side, knew there had to be someone more sinister at hand. Maybe the boys knew more than I did.

“Your ex-roommate?” he said, and I could’ve sworn I saw his pupils dilate. Leo went crazy for some good drama. “Not that I’ve heard of. Didn’t she go to rehab?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “But I think she’s back. I saw her just before leaving for the airport.”

Suddenly, I remembered something. Someone.

“Hold on,” I said, hopping off the chair, sticking my feet in a pair of slippers before heading to the door. “I’ll be right back.”

I saw Leo give Elliot a little shrug as I left, turning right down the hall toward Tara’s door. A few days had gone by, and there had been no word from her. Nothing. Not

that I had reached to her, either.

I should've.

“Hey,” I said, knocking on the door. For some reason, she had taken down the decorations from the front of her door, and I almost walked past it before realizing it was hers. “It’s me.”

There was no sound. Maybe she was out—even though it seemed unlikely, she did have a life outside of weed and ... me. Right?

I took out my phone and scrolled through the contacts until I found Kenny’s. We weren’t close by any means, and the last time we had texted each other was when we exchanged numbers. I had written, Kat, and he had sent, K. That was it.

Hey, I wrote, cringing at the awkward conversation starter. Do you know where Tara is?

He responded a second later. Just as I figured, he had no life. Which made two of us.

Idk, he wrote. Her room?

Shaking my head, I switched off my phone. I knocked again, just to be sure, then opened up my messages again to let Tara know that I was back home, safe and sound. I wanted to see her once more before I went back home for the next few days. Not that I couldn’t see her, but I wanted to make sure she’d be okay staying in the dorm alone. There was no way she was going all the way back to California.

I returned to my room to find both boys on their phones. They perked up as soon as I walked back in, which made me a little sadder than I thought it would. If anyone was the loser, it was both of them. At least Felix could hold his own without a distraction.

“Have you guys seen Tara around?” I asked, despite knowing the answer. They had no reason to be here, unless they were seeing me. Besides, they barely knew her. “Never mind.”

“No,” Leo said after a moment. “I mean, I haven’t.” He turned to look at Elliot. “Have you, Ell? You’ve been here more than I have.”

“What?” he looked a little bewildered for a second, as if Leo had said something he shouldn’t have. “Not since Kat left.”

I rolled my eyes. “Anyway. Is this all you’re bringing with you guys?” I said, nodding at the sleeping bags and Leo’s backpack.

“It’s just a few days,” Leo said, again looking at Elliot. “Right?”

It hit me that maybe for Leo, this was a little adventure, a challenge—stay in my house and sneak around in my room, play with my shit and try to find ways to get me by myself. I could see that. But with Elliot ... things were different. He really had no place to stay. Going back home wasn’t safe for him.

Even after break ended, he could still be just as ... homeless. I wasn’t even sure that his dad was still paying for his part of the rent at Powell.

I was his only escape.

Suddenly, I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket. I reached for it, wondering if it was Tara. To my relief, it was.

“Hey,” I said, putting the phone to my ear. “I’m so glad you called. Look, are you around today?”

There was silence at the other end of the line, and then, someone's voice—a voice I thought I wouldn't hear for a long time.

Eric.

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“Looks like you’ve dialed the wrong number,” he said, his voice low and sultry. Even though it was through the speaker, I could tell he was forcing it. “Or maybe you just changed your mind about me.”

“What the hell are you doing?” I spat back. “Where’s Tara?”

“Woah, settle down, chica,” he said, just as I heard a muffled giggle in the background. “You think I kidnapped her, or something?”

“Or something,” I muttered back, narrowing my eyes back at the hallway. “Why do you have her phone?”

There was a shuffling noise as if the line became spotty, and I wondered if he Eric was just switching the phone to his other hand until I heard a different voice.

“Kat?” Tara said. My jaw dropped. “You there?”

It took me a moment to regain the sanity to reply, and even then it felt like I was dreaming. “Yeah,” I said, though it came out sounding more like a question. “What are you ... doing?”

“Chillin’,” she said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Or, you know, spending time together. Hanging out. I don’t know, Eric, would you call this a date? Yeah. I think it’s a date.”

I nodded, as if it all made perfect sense—but then again, it wasn’t that far out of the question. She told me a while back that she used to have a crush on him, that she still

had some feelings for him. I guess I had assumed that whatever ‘feelings’ she did have for him had vanished once she got to know Kenny, but maybe I was wrong.

“Oh, wow,” I said, trying to mimic her happy-go-lucky tone. But it wasn’t working. I was too confused. “You guys are ... together?”

It had only been two days. Days. Not weeks, not months. I understood that people could fall in and out of love quickly—but even I didn’t think she was capable of this.

Besides, she had Kenny had a good thing going.

“Yeah, I’ve been sorta meaning to tell you,” she replied, lowering her voice. “Sorry, it’s just, I knew you and Eric had this thing at the start of school for a bit. We’ve been seeing each other for a couple weeks now. But, hey—everything’s cool, right?”

“Yeah,” I replied a little too quickly. “Everything’s cool.”

There was a small pause as it sounded like Tara was turning away, and I heard her giggle before she returned to the speaker.

“You wanna hang later?” she asked. “We could go on a double date.”

Again, she snickered—not laughing with me, but with Eric. Sure, she must’ve known that I had a thing with Leo. After all, she had seen me with him a couple of times. But I hadn’t really told her the whole story. I had no idea how much she knew.

It was weird. Vivian’s cousin seemed to know everything about our little rouse—the fact that there was more than ‘love’ between me and the three boys. But that was where he went wrong—maybe it had started out with hate, and been numbed to respect, but there were feelings there. There always had been.

The rest of the world might have thought that what was going on between me and Elliot, Felix and Leo, was all a show. It wasn't.

We had evolved beyond that.

"Um, how about no," I said, drawing my eyebrows together. I stole quick glance at Elliot, hoping to God he wasn't hearing any of this. "I'll come to your room later, though. Gotta go."

"Okay, bye! Love you!"

With that, the line went dead. I lowered the phone from my ear, and let out a sigh.

"Who's together?" Leo asked, wiggling his eyebrows. "Let me guess—your friend and that pothead?"

"My friend is a pothead," I answered, rolling my eyes. "But no. It doesn't matter who it is. You don't know him."

I went over to my bag and unzipped it. I remembered the knife that was in there just before I had boarded the plane. It didn't make sense. No one was near my bag except for two people—Tara, and Elliot.

When I started rifling through it to unpack, I snuck a glance up at Elliot to see if he was paying attention. But he was on his phone, in his own world. He had every reason to sabotage my flight to see Pierre, seeing as they hated each other's guts. But that would've been too obvious, too brash of him. If anything, Elliot had turned into the most passive-aggressive person I've known.

He wouldn't threaten me. Not in that way.



“So,” Elliot said, dropping his phone into his lap. “Did you run into anyone else on your trip?”

I started tossing things out of the bag, and a bra happened to land on Leo’s shoulder just as I looked up at Elliot.

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“Wow, thanks, Kat,” Leo snickered. “But I think I’m gonna need a few cup sizes down.”

“You mean Felix?” I asked, ignoring Leo’s comment. “Yeah. Did you know he was going to be there?”

Elliot nodded. “He didn’t really give us an explanation. Something to do with his dad.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “What do you mean, didn’t give you an explanation? Aren’t you his best friend?”

I glanced at Leo to see if he was the least bit interested in our conversation, but he was busy fiddling with the bra clasps at his back.

“Since when did you get so defensive of him?” Elliot replied. “He’s my best friend, so what?”

“Guys, I don’t think I’m doing this right,” Leo whined.

“So, you should know why he’s leaving the fucking country for who-knows how long,” I snapped back, thinking of Pierre. I’d kill him if I found out that he just up and left without telling me—but then again, we had a different sort of friendship.

Or, did we?

“Why do you give a shit?” Elliot responded, trying his best to keep his voice level. “If

he didn't want to tell me, it's none of my business. Best friend or not."

I let out a huff of a breath. "Guess you're right," I said, and tapped on my phone to check the time. "Anyway. We should go. My mom wants to see me for lunch."

"Lunch?" Leo hopped off the edge of my bed, wearing the bra over his shirt. "Count me in."

Elliot rolled his eyes and muttered something under his breath. Even though I didn't catch it, I felt it had something to do with Leo.

"What?" I said. "Are you going to be like this the whole time? Because if that's the case, you can leave."

"Whatever," he said, as if he was an angsty middle-schooler and I was his step-parent. "Fuckin' baby."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Excuse me?"

"He can't hold a serious conversation," he exclaimed, throwing an arm up toward his friend. "You think you can meet up with Kat's mom for lunch? Are you kidding? What're you going to say to her?"

"Whatever comes to mind," Leo replied with a shrug, and winked at me. If there was anything the both of us excelled at, it was getting on Elliot's last nerves. Leo did it without a thought—they were practically brothers. I did it because I was angry, and wanted to see him angry, too. "You know, how are you? Your daughter's amazing. What's your favorite thing on the menu? And so on ..."

Leo got off the bed and started toward me.

“Why, what are you gonna say?” he asked, raising an eyebrow at Elliot as he rested his elbow on my shoulder. “Sorry? ’Cause if anything, that’ll make for an awkward conversation starter.”

Before Leo could move, I snuck my right hand into his armpit and tickled. He leapt away with a yelp, and I threw my head back with a cackle and ruffled his hair.

“Don’t listen to him,” I whispered, leaning in toward Leo, pinching his earlobe with my other hand. “He’s just mad that he has to share me with you.”

“So am I,” Leo replied, and I felt his hand glide seamlessly down my side. “Except I know how to control my emotions.”

“At least one of you does,” I muttered, pulling away from him, and sighed as I caught Elliot dropping his gaze to the floor. I patted and reached for my pocket as I felt my phone buzz. It was my mom. She was waiting outside.

I looked up at Elliot, and couldn’t help but give him a sly grin. I couldn’t wait to get my hands on him. Two days?

It had felt more like two months.

“My mom’s here to pick me up,” I announced. “You guys going to come with?”

The two boys shared a look with each other, then both shrugged.

“If that’s okay with you,” Leo replied, while Elliot remained silent. I took that as a yes. He had nowhere else to go.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said, nodding at them, and went to yank open the door.

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“Wait,” Elliot said. “Don’t you need your stuff?”

I shook my head. “I have everything I need at home. Plus, it’s only for a few days, so.”

Once they had gathered their stuff—which didn’t take much time, considering they had brought nothing more than a couple sleeping bags—we went out into the hallway. Passing by Tara’s door, I paused, and gave it another knock. Still gone, out on that ‘date’, or whatever it was.

I continued toward the elevator, growing more nervous the closer we got to seeing my mom. What would she think, seeing me with both of them? It wasn’t like her to turn people away, especially when she was used to Pierre crashing at our place every other week. But this time was different, and nothing could prepare her for this.

I’d just have to hold my breath, and see.

We made it out of the lobby and into the full sunlight. Even though it was chilly, the autumn sky was clear and blue, and that fact seemed to comfort me as I spied my mom’s car parked a few yards away.

The second I spotted her face in the open window, I beamed.

She poked her face out of the window, mirroring my own expression. But her eyes flicked over to where Elliot and Leo were trailing behind, and the sudden darkness in her gaze crushed me.

Before she could say anything, I rushed over to the car, pulled open the passenger side door and locked myself in. For a moment, I stared straight ahead through the windshield before turning to look at her. My mom looked just as she always had—warm half-grin, wrist hooked over the steering wheel, brown eyes looking between mine, like she was dropping me off at school for the thousandth time.

“So?” she said, nodding at the rearview where we could see Elliot and Leo standing awkwardly at the curb. “What’s that about?”

I looked out the window and held up a finger to Elliot, indicating that we needed a minute. Then I turned back to her.

“Hi, mom,” I replied, smiling sweetly. “That ...” I began, and took in a deep breath, “is what you’d call a mistake. But that mistake needs a place to stay. Both of them, actually.”

She nodded slowly, her expression turning hard. I couldn’t tell what was going through her head, and I needed her to say something, anything.

“I know how you feel about them,” I continued. “I get it. But things have changed, mom. They’re my friends now.”

What a white lie.

“Elliot ...” I bit my lip trying to find the right words to explain his situation. “He can’t go home for fall break. And he doesn’t have a place to stay at campus, because ... his parents are having some trouble.”

“Are they?” She raised a manicured eyebrow. “I’m not surprised.”

Ouch.

I thought about everything she had told me on the phone, just after Vivian revealed the text she received from my mom about seeing me with Elliot. My mom was earnest, loyal to everyone but Elliot's father—and it had to be for a good reason. The same reason she had left my own father.

The same reason Elliot's mom was now—possibly—leaving Mr. Lancaster.

“Yeah,” I said weakly, averting my gaze from hers, which had become impenetrable. “Pierre is also coming back from England. Between you and me, I don't care if we can't accommodate all three of them. But Pierre needs to stay with us. You know that.”

“Of course,” she said, her tone softening up. “He's welcome, any time.”

“But what about them?” I nodded up at the rearview. “If they cause any trouble, we can kick them out. Promise.”

My mom placed her elbow on the driver's seat window sill, and rubbed her temple. She let out a long sigh.

“I don't understand what exactly is going on between you guys. But you're my daughter, and I know you wouldn't make a mistake unless there was a very good reason for it.” Her smile almost brought my eyes to tears. “They can stay. But I'm not feeding them.”

I leaned over to give her a hug, then gave her a peck on the cheek before drawing back.

“Thanks, mom,” I said, and turned to roll down the window. She wasn't ever one to turn people away—but even I was surprised she relented. I'd make it up to her. “You guys can come,” I called out of the window. Leo started for the car first.

“Thank you, thank you!” he exclaimed as he plopped himself into the seat right behind me. He reached out to shake my mom’s hand. “You won’t regret this, Ms. Silver. I’ll do all the dishes. I’ll mop the floors. Empty the trash.”

“In your dreams,” I snorted, and watched as Elliot glided over into the seat adjacent to mine. Though he said nothing, he caught my mom’s gaze in the mirror. Both gave a mutual nod, which said more than I could fathom.

This was going to be rough.



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My mom started the engine, and a moment later we were pulling out the exit of the parking circle. For the next five minutes or so, everyone was silent. I kept checking the mirror to see if the boys were communicating with each other, and my assumption was right—they were on their phones, texting, and stealing glances up at each other.

“What’s for lunch?” Leo said, breaking the silence. I guess his sudden bravery had more to do with the fact that he was bored more than anything. “I bet you make a mean feast, Ms. Silver.”

Instead of responding, my mom turned her head to raise her eyebrows at me. She wasn’t amused.

“I don’t think you guys will be eating with us,” I replied slowly. “Right, mom?”

The car bumped across a deep pothole, and I knew we were getting close to the building. The street was familiar to me. But all of a sudden, the car veered right, approaching the downtown area near Woodman.

“Uh, mom?” I asked.

“I wouldn’t want you to leave your friends alone just to sit down with me,” she said, her voice dripping sarcasm. “So, I’ll let you three off here, and I’ll see you back at the apartment. How’s that?”

She pulled up into a parking spot, and before I had the chance to process what she was saying, her hand dove into her wallet and came back out to hand me a couple twenty-dollar bills.

“Get something to eat. That should be enough.”

I took the money from her, and stuffed into my pocket. She was mad. It was evident. I couldn't blame her. She needed some time to think about this before jumping right into hostess-mode. These weren't just any friends after all.

In her mind, these were my bullies. And they always would be.

We got out of the car, and it sped off the moment we all made it to the curb. Without a word, we turned to look at the restaurant. I was already familiar with the place—a well-known diner that my mom and I frequented often when I was in high school. It was an easy spot for kids to come during their lunch period, close enough for them to pile into a car and zoom back to class just a minute before the bell. I doubted that either Elliot or Leo had even heard of the place, considering they didn't show up at school half the time anyway.

So, I was surprised when Leo started toward the door, slapping the host on the back as we walked into the building.

“Hey, man!” the host, a middle-age dude, said as he ruffled Leo's blond curls. “Long time, no see! How's life at college?”

I stood there, jaw dropped, as Leo continued to converse with the man that I had known all my life, and yet, never said a word to other than “Hi, how are you?” or “Thank you. Have a good one.” The guy had been working there for decades, I was sure of it, and I had been going here since I was a little girl. Sure, he recognized me, but we didn't know each other. And Leo did?

It was embarrassing. For me.

Once we sat down at a booth, I leaned over the table and whispered, “How do you

know him?”

Leo scrunched his brows together. He was thinking the same thing—what do you mean, how?

“He’s a nice guy,” he said, shrugging. “I went here as a kid. I don’t know, we just talked. His name’s Rupert.”

Shaking my head, I leaned back against the scratched, faux leather cushion. What I meant to say was that I couldn’t believe for one second that he’d ever frequent a place like this run-of-the-mill small-town diner.

Before I could say anything else, Leo’s attention shifted over my shoulder. Even though Elliot was seated beside me, he craned his neck to follow his friend’s gaze. I turned to see the two people I thought I’d never see sitting together in a million years.

Tara and Vivian.

There they were, talking, laughing, as if they’d been friends since day one at Freeman, as if Vivian hadn’t tried to ruin my friend’s life. I closed my eyes and looked again just to be sure—but it was them.

I turned my head back around before either one could notice me. They were at the far side of the restaurant, and yet I felt like they could hear their own names slipping out of my mouth if I dared say them.

“Isn’t that ...” Leo said, looking just as confused as I was. I nodded.

“My old roommate,” I confirmed, narrowing my eyes at the menu. All of a sudden, my desire to eat, to numb my emotions, was enormous. “And my friend.”

My only friend at Freeman.

My mind was reeling. When I was talking to her on the phone, it sounded like Tara was with Eric, not her mortal enemy. Was I just hearing things?

I just wanted to go home, eat a home-cooked meal. More than anything.

“Check it out,” Leo said, nodding back at their table. I turned my head again, and my jaw dropped.

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Eric was waltzing up to their table, and plopped himself down beside Tara, throwing his arm over her shoulders the same way Pierre always did with me. He must've been in the bathroom, because now I noticed the three sets of plates on the table. They were dining together.

Was I dreaming?

High?

Biting my tongue, I turned back around, placed my elbows on the table and buried my head into my arms.

"I think I'm sick," I muttered. "And exhausted."

Leo, faithfully the watchdog, kept his chin raised as he continued to watch the spectacle unfold. He relayed the information to me and Elliot with the tone of a newscaster.

"Young man leans in to give friend of Kat a light kiss on the forehead—just enough to make a certain someone jealous—who, I don't know, but someone—and friend of Kat returns the favor while ex-roommate leans in to say something."

"Her name's Tara," I said, rolling my eyes, before he could go on.

He went on.

"Tara pushes whats-his-name out of his seat and squeezes out of the booth. Ex-

roommate hands something to, um, Tara, looks like an envelope, or something. Both Tara and roomie leave the diner.”

He paused there, and I waited impatiently for him to continue.

“Roomie comes back,” Leo said slowly, drawing his brows together. “And ... kisses ... him?”

“What?” This time, I had no shame in turning around and staring. There they were, Vivian and Eric, flat-out making out in the booth with Tara gone. It almost made me want to yell, “Get a room,” it was so cliché. So pathetic of them.

What the hell was going on?

Everything Tara had told me—about Vivian ruining her chances at art school, her being bullied just like me ... was it all fake? Or were they really still friends?

Was she with Eric, or not?

Maybe I was wrong. Maybe it was all a setup—something Tara was doing for someone else’s sake in addition to her own. And yet, it didn’t feel right. I knew she had a genuine crush on the guy. She wasn’t the type to fuck around with feelings.

The waiter came over to our table before any one of us could openly process what just happened. I ordered us three glasses of water and a family-sized serving of fries to start myself off. I was going to need it.

Or maybe not. Something was going on—something suspicious—but I would reach out to Tara later. I needed to speak with her one on one. After all, if Eric really was cheating on her without her being aware of it, then it was my responsibility to tell her. I couldn’t let her get hurt like this.

“So,” I said, leaning a bit toward Elliot’s shoulder, “we know the meaning behind that tat.” I nodded at the bandaged dagger in his arm. “What about the dragon?”

I wanted to switch the subject and avoid thinking about Vivian as much as possible. Of course, doing so was easier said than done when I could hear her annoying, high-pitched voice just yards away.

He seemed to bristle at my slight touch, and it made me lift my hand to push back some of his already-short hair as if to admire his inked skin. It always baffled me that his parents had allowed him to get tattooed as a minor. Even if he hadn’t been a bully, bringing him home would’ve made my mom nuts—he wasn’t exactly goody-two-shoes material. In other words, he was no Pierre.

Still, it was hot.

Elliot shook his head, as if being reminded of a bad memory. “It’s probably the best mistake I’ve ever made,” he murmured, turning so that his body fully faced me. “Besides picking on you.”

I rolled my eyes, but couldn’t help wishing I could just pull him away from here, out everyone’s sight, and do what I wanted with him. Two days was too long.

“Oh yeah?” I replied.

“It was done for free by a friend of mine. My parents didn’t know, and when they found out, they totally flipped out,” he explained. “But maybe that was part of it. I wanted to do something to get them angry. It was cathartic, I guess.”

I nodded, trying to fill in the gaps between the lines, and gave up when I figured there were things he wasn’t ready to tell me. Probably had a good reason for it, too. I’d respect that for now.

“Which friend was this?” I asked, genuinely curious. Was there a fourth rich boy I needed to be wary of?

Elliot smirked at me. “You don’t know her. At least, not yet.”



I narrowed my eyes at him.

Her?

Apparently, I wasn't the only one who didn't know about this mysterious girl. Leo raised his eyebrows right after he said the word. It was enough to make my blood boil, and yet, it was uncharacteristic of me.

If he had a female friend, so be it. I had Pierre.

And now, maybe it was only right of me to understand what Elliot was going through, the jealousy he had for what me and Pierre had together. Now, all of a sudden, Elliot had a past with his own friend. It was only fair.

"What's her name?" I asked, and hated the way my voice sounded. But I was curious.

"Ruby," he answered. "She didn't go to Woodman."

I nodded, letting the fact sink in. The same tattoo that I loved so much was done by a girl—or woman—that was closer to Elliot than I was. Close enough to permanently create art on his skin.

It was a level of intimacy I could only hope to achieve with him.

"Well, well, well," said a familiar, shrill voice. I looked up to find Vivian standing over our table. "If it isn't my girl, Kathleen Silver. And her ..." She paused to give Elliot and Leo each a separate, long half-lidded look, as if she herself were picking

her next meal. "... boytoys."

"What do you want?" I blurted, wanting anything but to get sucked into a long uncomfortable conversation of beating-around-the-bush. "With Tara I mean. Why were you eating with her?"

Vivian put on a pouty expression, twisting a lock of her long brown-dyed hair. She was wearing a crop top, even though it was almost winter.

"Nice to see you, too, roomie," she replied, putting her elbow on the back of Elliot's seat. I refrained from swatting at and sinking my nails into her hand out of fear of her calling me names—something to do with being a cat, no doubt. I wasn't in the mood. She leaned down as if to whisper something in Elliot's ear, but spoke for the rest of us to hear. "I have a favor to ask ... and something to give in return."

"That wasn't my question," I said flatly. "What are you doing with Tara?"

Vivian's bright pink lips twisted into a smirk. "I'm getting to that, sweetie."

Fuck me. I'd blow my brains out every time she addressed me as anything, let alone sweetie.

Who did she think she was?

"Make it quick," I responded.

Since Elliot and I occupied the one side of the booth, she stepped toward Leo's side and squeezed in next to him. Leo, obviously not expecting her to make that move, awkwardly shuffled over to give her room so that his shoulder hugged the wall.

She folded her hands on the table as if she were about to make a business proposal.

Which is exactly what she was here for. Or, might as well have been.

Vivian opened her mouth, but just as she was about to say something, Leo beat her to it.

“You want a foursome,” he said, nodding. “Knew it.”

Vivian rolled her eyes, and shifted a little away from him. I covered my mouth with my hand to hide my smile, and caught Leo smirking back at me.

“First of all, I just want us to forget everything that happened,” Vivian continued, talking more to me than anyone else. “I want us to start off clean. I’m on your side—and I can help you.” Her eyes shifted to Elliot, and she took in a deep breath. The school wants to kick me out. My grades suck, the RAs hate me, and apparently I’m leaving trails of empty bottles and ... plastic bags. And my parents want me back home because of what happened,” she explained, and I couldn’t help but cringe at her pinched-up tone of voice. I used to think it was just a Cali girl accent, but Tara had proven otherwise.

“Because of your addiction?” I butted in, just as the waiter came bearing our meals. Vivian lowered her head, glancing over her shoulder as if to make sure no other strangers had heard that. I didn’t care what they thought of her—actually the worse they thought, the better. She deserved it. “Or the fact that you tried to obliterate me? Or is it something even more sinister?”

I started on my fries, but Elliot waited before reaching for his sandwich. Leo, on the other hand, dug right into his burger.

“No one’s perfect, but I’m not addicted, Kath-leen,” she drawled. She paused a moment to sit back, flip a lock of hair over her shoulder, and check her phone, as if she wanted to waste our time. “According the Dean of Students, or whoever, there’s a

chance that I won't get kicked out if I do something to 'contribute positively to the campus community,' or some shit like that."

I nearly choked on my food. Something positive? Was she kidding?

"Like," I started slowly, "an extracurricular?"

Vivian nodded. "Yeah, but like, more than that. I need to like, start a cult, or something. Like the rowing team."

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“You mean crew?” I said raising an eyebrow. “Why do you need our help with this? Pick up a tennis racquet and join the team. Or whatever it is you ... do.”

Other than partying, nothing to my knowledge.

“It’s not that simple,” Vivian said. “I need to do something that also shows I’m improving. That shows I’m clean. Or cleaner than I used to be.”

Elliot and Leo shared a look, and then both of them looked at me. I didn’t have an answer for her. I wasn’t quite even sure what she was asking.

One thing I did know was that I had no intention of getting involved. At best, I wanted her gone. It’d be better for the both of us. And that seemed like something she was trying to avoid.

Vivian took out her phone, and slid it over to me. I squinted down at the screen, then looked back up at her.

“Is this a sign-up sheet?” I asked, glancing back down to read the details more thoroughly. “For ... NA?”

“I’m forming a Narcotics Anonymous group,” she exhaled. “As my contribution. And I want you guys to be in it.”

I froze, then turned my head to look at Elliot. He had the same choked-up expression, as if holding back a laugh that was uncalled for. Come on—it made sense for her, but us?

“Um ...” I started, slowly sliding the phone back to her. “Thanks, but ... we don’t need to be in his group. I mean ...” I paused to glance at Leo and Elliot—didn’t want to make any assumptions. “At least, I don’t think I need to be.”

“That’s the thing, Kathleen,” Vivian said, lowering her voice. She leaned over the table, her eyes pinned on mine. “I know you don’t need it, that none of you need it. But other kids in our school do. And those are the kids I don’t want to be in it.” She waited, as if any of what she was saying was sinking in. It wasn’t.

“I don’t get it,” I answered. “You want to start an NA group because you need it, but you want kids who aren’t addicts to be in it?”

Vivian ran a hand through her hair, and raised her chin to glance back at her table. Following her line of vision, I noticed Eric still seated at the table, watching us.

“Look,” Vivian said, returning her gaze to mine. “There’s a certain number of hours I need to put in to make it look like I’m actually doing the work. If I’m successful at forming this group, and lead the meetings for a certain amount of time, then I can stay at Freeman. But—” She paused for effect. “I can’t just drop the group. If I get kids in this group that actually need the help, then I’ll have to continue leading it. Which is not what I need in my life at this point, honestly.”

“Honestly,” I muttered under my breath.

Again, she leaned toward me, putting her elbows on the table and staring me dead in the eyes as if to hypnotize me into accepting her request.

“Look,” she repeated. “All I need is to have a minimum of three people in the group. But in order for it to look legit, I’m going to have Tara in on it, too. You won’t have to do anything other than show up a couple times a week for an hour and pretend that you want to be there.”

“Who would know?” Leo asked.

“There’ll be a supervisor,” Vivian groaned. “Dean O’Donnell, or whatever her name was.”

Right. The one administrative staff member who knew exactly what occurred during that first week of school between me and Vivian. It must’ve taken a miracle for her to give Vivian this one last chance.

“So,” Elliot said, speaking up for the first time. “What does she get in return?”

Vivian flicked her gaze over to him.

“Not just her,” she said, as if I were out of the picture. “All three of you. And the other one.”

“Felix isn’t here,” Elliot replied. No emotion in his voice. “Keep him out of this.”

Maybe he was trying to protect his friend from getting into this stupid scheme.

“So?” I pressed. “What do all three of us get in return? Plus Tara?”

I had only known Tara for a couple months now, but she was more than acquaintance at this point, and I cared about her as if she were a close friend. Sort of like a reincarnated version of Pierre. She was a genuine, kind-hearted person, and I’d hate to see her get hurt again. Besides, I was the one Vivian had beef with—and I didn’t want anyone getting caught up in it that didn’t deserve the pain.

Vivian raised an eyebrow at me. “For the record, you don’t have to worry about Tara. She’s in good hands.”

“Good hands, meaning, your hands?” I mirrored her expression. “For some reason, that just doesn’t add up to me.”

“To you, it doesn’t,” Vivian retorted. “You may think she’s your bestie right now, but she’s been my bestie since day one. We’ve known each other for years—and just because we’ve had a couple bumps in the road doesn’t discount how close we are. I know what’s good for her. You,” she emphasized, “don’t.”



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I had to admit, that hurt—not because it was true, but because it implied the opposite of everything Tara had told me. I wasn't sure who was lying, but I hoped it wasn't her.

“Anyway,” she continued, turning to Elliot, “I know what you need. Your dad's broke, and he needs what I can give. Or, more specifically, what my cousin's family can give.”

I widened my eyes at that. Her cousin's family.

She was talking about Tommy.

“My parents are well off,” she went on. “I'm not going to pretend they aren't. But the British side of my family, well ...” She smirked. “Let's just say they got my cousin, Tommy, into one of the best schools across the pond. And he's dumb as shit.”

It all made sense.

The fact that Pierre was doing Tommy's homework for a price—and he was able to pay it. And Tara ... I had been telling her everything these past few weeks. She knew that I was involved with the three boys, and that Elliot's family was down in luck. Now that she was in cahoots with Vivian, she must've talked. That's how Vivian found out about Elliot's situation.

“So, what, you cousin's parents are just going to hand over their life's savings?” Elliot snorted. “I don't know you. Or your cousin. So, I don't know how the fuck you know about me and my family, but if you're gonna know anything, it's this—we're

not accepting your money.”

“Why not?” Vivian pushed. “Who else is presenting you with options?”

That shut him up.

I could imagine myself in his shoes—having the reputation of money, but having none, and being asked if I wanted it all back. All he had to do in return was play along to her stupid plan.

There had to be a bigger catch.

“Ell,” I muttered, turning my head toward him. “Let’s talk about this later.”

“My family’s in a lot of debt,” he said, ignoring my request. For once, he actually sounded like he was dripping with desperation. Actual mental agony. “It’s gonna take a lot more than a few thousand dollars.”

“How about a few million?” Vivian said. “And then a few more?”

Elliot shook his head, and chuckled a bit as he leaned back against the back of the seat. “I ... I don’t know what to say. How’s that possible?”

“My uncle’s a very successful swing trader,” she said with a shrug. “Invests in all sorts of businesses. Tech, banks, green energy ... even restaurant conglomerates.”

Leo shot Elliot a hard look, but Elliot’s gaze was focused on Vivian, as if her eyes were gold coins themselves.

“So, you’re saying your uncle is willing to hand over millions of dollars as long as I attend these meetings and pretend I’m addicted to coke?” Elliot said slowly, more out

of fear of bursting out laughing than anything else. His expression was glowing for the first time in hours since I had seen him. “That’s all?”

“Come on, Ell,” I said, putting my hand on his shoulder. I wanted him to face me, but he didn’t budge. “Don’t be stupid. Let’s think about this.”

“Hell yeah, I’m gonna think about it.”

“Here’s the only thing,” Vivian said, holding up a hand as if to calm Elliot down. “I need all three of you to join in—not one, not two. And I need help with my school work,” she added. I rolled my eyes. By help, she meant forgery. “Otherwise, your boyfriend here gets nothing. And I’m sure it would benefit both of you to have his family get their money back.”

With that, Vivian shimmied out of the booth and stood over our table. Smoothing out her barely-there top, she said, “Think about it. I need to know by tomorrow.”

She whirled around and glided back over to her table, where Eric still waited for her, his arms spread out over the back of the seat. They exchanged a few words before Vivian pulled Eric by the arm out of the booth. With one last look over her shoulder, she gave me another smirk, and they left.

I turned back to my empty plate with a sick feeling in my stomach.

“I think I’m gonna puke,” I said, wiping some ketchup off the corner of my lip. Didn’t even realize how messy I had been. It was the stress.

I reached for my phone to see the time, but it didn’t matter. We had been here long enough. I just wanted to go home, even if that meant leaving the boys to finish their food alone.

“Kat?”

I felt Leo’s hand on mine as he reached over to hold onto me. I looked up at him, and his slight smile melted my heart, restored some sort of calm. For years, he had been the master at convincing anyone of anything, all with a calculated smirk and bright eyes. He was good at playing games—but he also had a different side to him. The side that cared about me.

He didn’t have to say anymore. He was there for me, on my side, understood my apprehension.

Elliot didn't.

"I'm gonna go home," I said, and slipped the apartment key over to Elliot along with the money my mom had given us for the food. "I'll text you the address. I just ... need a moment."

Without a word, he slid out of the seat in order to let me by. He avoided looking into my eyes. I wasn't angry with him. I just didn't know what to feel. There was just something in my gut telling me that if we agreed to Vivian's plan, something bad would come of it. It didn't make sense to me.

Elliot would be getting more out of this agreement than Vivian would be getting in return. Something else was at stake—where would the money actually be coming from?

"Kat," Elliot said, just as I started walking toward the exit. I turned around, and saw his eyes were watering, just so slightly. That's why he was avoiding looking at me. He was trying to hide it—hide himself. "I'm sorry, I just need to think about this. I'll see you later, okay?"

I nodded, and turned back toward the exit. The host, Rupert, nodded at me and gave me a pat on the shoulder as I walked through the door, as if he knew something had happened.

"Thanks," I said, nodding at him. "Have a good one."

I hated my life.

Pushing through the glass double doors, the cold air rushed at my skin through my open jacket. A moment later, I felt a new warmth around my shoulders.

Leo's arms.

"Wait up," he said, hugging me close to him. "I'm coming with you."

I shook my head, but allowed him to hold me close to him as we braved the cold.

"It's a five-minute walk," I replied. "You up for that?"

"I'm up for anything."

I wrapped my arm around his waist, hugging him closer.

"So," I said, once we were far enough away from the restaurant. "What do you think about all this?"

I felt him shrug. "He's desperate," Leo replied. "I'd understand if he went for it. Seems simple enough."

"That's exactly what I'm saying," I said. We turned the corner, and I could see the top of my apartment building in the distance. "It's too easy. Vivian's going to rope him in and get something else out of him, and I'm not sure what. I don't even think he's considering that."

"You don't?" Leo turned his head to look at me. "Because it seems like he's doing that right now. Considering, I mean."

"Yeah," I muttered. Maybe that was it—I didn't even want him to consider any part of this. "So, you'd do this for him? Sign up for her stupid plan?"

Leo took a moment before answering, and then said, “I’d do it if Ell wanted me to, sure. I’ve always done what he’s wanted.”

His answer left me feeling colder than the weather did. He was right, of course. Leo might have been the mastermind behind the countless schemes and pranks they had pulled back at Woodman, but he only did so because Elliot wanted it. I couldn’t remember a day that only one or two of them had showed up at school. If Elliot was absent, so were they. If he was there, they’d do their hardest to be present, too.

If Elliot needed to do this, so would he.

Still, there was a bitter edge to the way he had responded—always done what he wanted. Always.

As if he’s never had the choice to begin with.

We were about to cross the street, but before we reached the corner, I pulled Leo back and wrapped my hands around his arms, holding him close to me.

“Why did you?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at his, searching his gaze for any hint of authenticity. No more lies. “Why are you friends with him?”

I had realized something—Leo didn’t belong with Elliot. Outside of the bit of mischief he had caused back in high school, he proved to me that his innocence was more than skin-deep. He didn’t do the things he did back at Woodman for the thrill of it—because he actually wanted to hurt me.

No.

Leo never hated me. It was Elliot who made it seem like he did.

“It’s embarrassing,” he replied, moving his gaze to the ground even though his own hands tightened his grip on my arms. “We didn’t start out as friends. In middle school, he saw that I was close with the girls. Guess it made him insecure or jealous, or something, so he started calling me names and shit. He was my bully before he became yours.”



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He turned back toward the road, and nudged me along. It was clear to me that he didn't want to continue talking about this as he quickened his pace.

“And if I couldn't overcome a bully,” he continued, to my surprise, “I had to join him.”

I was stunned. If anyone, Leo was just like me—by hurting others, he had saved himself. He had done what he had done in high school just to get by, just because he had to if he wanted to save himself some sort of mental sanity.

“But why are you still friends?” I said, almost angry that he was telling me all this just now. “You're in college, Leo. I mean, what's stopping you from branching out?”

Fuck, I probably sounded like his mother.

“Maybe I have been,” he said, like it was the most casual bit of information he cared to dispel.

“Okay?” I laughed, sounding a little more nervous than I needed to. So, Leo Borowski was making new friends, huh? Someone other than the host of the local diner?

Didn't seem right. But then again, nothing in our lives ever did.

We continued walking for a few moments without saying a word. It was awkward for the both of us—knowing the fact that he was once in the same position as I had been, that Elliot had picked on his right-hand man. I had never considered the possibility

that either Leo or Felix would follow in Elliot's footsteps simply to avoid being crushed by them.

And yet, it made complete sense.

"Hey," I said, turning to him again once we were a few blocks away from the building. "I have an idea. It's gonna sound crazy, but hear me out."

Leo nodded. "I love crazy ideas."

We were on the sidewalk of a quiet residential street, the sound of the cars in the downtown area just a drone in the background. There was no one around. I stepped closer to him until my chest was pressed against his, my forehead grazing the tip of his nose. I let my hand fondle with the zipper of his jacket, then slowly tugged it down.

"Kat, what're you doing?" Leo rasped, turning his head to glance over his shoulder. "We're, like, in the middle of—"

"I'm giving you the option," I said, my fingers, hot against his cold skin, now slipping underneath his shirt as I looked him dead in the eyes. "Do something not because Elliot wants you to, but because you can. Because you want to."

I nodded past his shoulder, looking down the street. My apartment building was just a few blocks away from the high school, and since it was a week day, the school would be open. We could slip in without anyone noticing—we hadn't gotten any older, might as well still have been seniors. Find a bathroom stall.

It's not like we could go anywhere else. My mom's eyes would be watching like a hawk's.

“Where?” Leo asked. “At the school?”

I nodded, allowing my fingers to ghost lightly up his abs underneath his shirt. To any passersby, we’d just look as if we were having a tender moment. To me, however, this was anything but a gesture of romance.

I was mad at Elliot for the thousandth time—not because he had hurt me, not because he had hurt Pierre, but because he had hurt someone who was even closer to him than I was. Because it proved that he had been a bully from the start and that somewhere rooted in his human heart was pure selfishness. His bullying didn’t start with me, and who was to say it wouldn’t end with me?

Here I was, once again, caught in a struggle of reconciling his horrible actions with his ‘true’ self. It was starting to weigh heavily on me.

“Are you being serious?” Leo said, his lips curling into a hysterical smirk. He loved some good spur of the moment amusement, just like that time he had convinced me to climb to the top of the dorm building at Freeman. “If you are ... then sure. Yes.”

With that, I grabbed his arm and started running toward down the sidewalk, dragging him after me. In a second, he had caught up with me.

“Race ya,” he said, and started sprinting ahead. Laughing like a maniac, I tore after him, and could start to feel beads of sweat forming in my armpit despite the cold. We sped past the apartment building, and as we turned the corner, the school came into full view. Students were walking around in small clusters, heading back into the building after lunch. It was perfect timing.

“Never thought I’d come back here,” Leo panted as we slowed down, whirling around to face me. He was a few yards ahead. “I think I won.”

“I think you did,” I laughed, my eyes tracing his dark eyelashes and the contrast with his honey-colored curls. He could’ve been a surfer if his skin was a little more sun-kissed. “Let’s see if we can make it in.”

We slowed our pace as we approached the building, trying our best to look like a couple of bored teenagers dragging our asses back to class after a less-than-thrilling lunch out on the town. Fortunately, we had years to master that look, but Pierre and I had never been cool enough to actually leave campus for lunch. Neither of us ever had our own car, and we were too lazy to walk.

Thankfully, none of the students recognized us—or if they did, they probably figured we were just back to visit some teachers. Either way, we breezed through the front doors of Woodman as if we had never left, or as if we had entered our past through a gate to some weird alternative reality. A reality where Elliot, Felix and Pierre didn’t exist.

A reality where it was just the two people who were victims. Leo and I understood each other because we had been Elliot’s original punching bags.

“Follow me,” Leo said, grabbing onto my arm and pulling me past the lobby desk. The security guard sitting there didn’t even give us a second look. “I know a good place.”

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I thought that when I did make the trip back to Woodman, it'd be years after graduating college, when I would've become a more focused, confident individual. I'd be able to physically face my past. But already my surroundings that once felt so familiar had a completely different energy—the fact that I knew this place inside-out made me feel almost invincible.

I was already strong enough to be here again.

We veered around the corner and sped across the hallway toward the stairwell. All of a sudden, I figured it out. He was taking me to the same place I had lured Elliot that last day of high school.

We burst through the stairwell doors and stumbled down the stairs. It was completely empty. This was one of those narrow stairwells that no one in the school used unless they absolutely had to.

And we had to.

Leo dragged me down the landing and pressed me against the wall. We stood there, frozen, breathing hard. My heavy coat felt suffocating over a thin coating of sweat and his hot breath.

“Well?” I murmured, hearing my own voice echo despite my quiet tone. “Do what you want.”

I could feel his hesitation. This wasn't his element—even if he had roamed these halls as one of the top dogs, he had never done anything without the top dog's

consent.

“Do what you want,” I repeated, slipping my coat off on my shoulders and letting it drop to the floor. “Now.”

I watched Leo’s eyes as he looked between mine. There was an apprehension there, as if, all of a sudden, he didn’t know what to do, only that he was supposed to do something.

And then, heat came over his gaze.

He dropped to his knees, his puppy-dog eyes still locked with mine as if he was afraid I’d run away.

“What are you doing, proposing?” I laughed, but the air in my throat was cut off as I felt his hands start to work my pants down. His fingers were frigid against my skin, and it burned they was so cold.

Seconds later, he had my pants down to my ankles, exposing my waist, cotton panties and bare legs. The air in the stairwell was damp and chilled from the autumn weather, and goosebumps rode across my thighs like a tide.

Leo’s lips came to the rescue.

His touch was hesitant at first, his lips fluttering across the skin of my knee and carefully working his way up along my thigh. But then, he took his hands and wrapped them around my calves, and slowly massaged my legs up and down as his kisses turned to nips and licks. His tongue, hot and wet in contrast to the cold air, singed my skin in the best way possible.

His lips started to drag themselves up my inner thigh, and my fingers found their way

into his hair, and held on to him.

After what felt like an eternity, I felt his nose come into contact with the fabric of my panties. He paused for a moment, and then, he raised his chin and his nose pushed further through the fabric against my pussy, breathing me in.

As if to give him a little encouragement, I looked down at him and stroked his bangs away from his face. That prompted him to pull back, just enough for him to catch my gaze and smile.

He moved his hands from my legs up along the back of my thighs, and grazed the curve of my ass. My back was plastered against the wall, but to give him better access, I slouched down, and my hips moved closer to his face as my ass moved away from the wall.

Leo's fingers worked their way around the fabric of my panties, and a second later, they were around my ankles. My lower half was completely bare, while Leo remained clothed. I wasn't about to point that out, though—his face moved toward my pussy, and I could almost feel my clit flexing as his nose brushed against my sweaty folds of skin.

My finger wound tightly through his golden coils of hair, almost scraping at his scalp. I didn't need to say anything for him to know that I was begging for him to make the move.

Just as I was about to give his head a slight nudge, he tilted his face upward and I felt the warm, slippery sensation of his tongue graze my clit. I let out a soft whimper, and that was enough encouragement for him to get a little rougher.

His hands worked their way up my ass as his lips closed in on my clit, and he began sucking, swirling his tongue around the small muscle like it was his source of water,

and he was parched.

My pussy was sopping within seconds.

“More,” I moaned, my back arching away from the wall, forcing my vagina closer to him. “I need more.”

He didn’t respond, which was good—better to act on what I said rather than respond. My wish was granted. Leo’s tongue stretched lower down and licked at the slit of my opening, parting me open with that one wet stroke. My head rammed back against the wall as Leo’s head bobbed upward, his tongue scraping into me like he was downing a shot of hard liquor that would put him to sleep with the best dreams.

He drank me up, and it sent me shaking with bliss.

As he continued to eat me out, I moved my hips to the rate of his thrusts to wean as much out of him as I could. Now all my attention was on the heat between my legs, the moist puddle that was overflowing into his mouth. The thrusts of his tongue were short, but fast, and it provided the stimulation I wanted from him. I started bucking my hips to match his pace, but after a few moments it felt like I was the one driving him.

“Stop,” I breathed, pushing him away from me. It wasn’t a rough motion, but the fact that I had told him to stop made him land back on his hands like I slapped him. With a grin, I went along with it, bending down to shove him to the floor.



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“I can’t have all the fun, now can I?” I said, my hands racing to unbutton his pants and pull them down his waist.

Leo lay flat on his back, the first step inches behind his head. Once his pants were pulled down his thighs just enough to allow me access, I laid one hand on the bulge in his boxers. He arched his hips up, and his hands stretched back behind him flat against the side of the step.

He closed his eyes as I rolled his boxers down until his dick was released from its pathetic bondage. His short coils of hair were darker down here, but not as thick. I took both his balls in between my fingers, feeling the soft, warm skin, just like he might fondle my breasts. Leo let out an uneven sigh, moving his knees farther apart, which made his manhood easier to handle.

I hadn’t been looking at his face this whole time, but when I crawled forward to position myself over him, I stole a quick glance. From that small bit of foreplay, his cheeks were beet-red. It was fucking adorable.

“You’re gonna like this,” muttered, bending down so that my voice filled his mouth.

He didn’t respond, but his toothy grin said it all. Just like when I reached for his hair, his hands found their way into mine, groping my scalp as if he were afraid I would pull away, as if this were all just a bluff.

Planting my hands on either end of his waist, I stretched my back straight, and centered my opening with the tip of his cock. The world seemed to stop, the air frozen around us even though our skin glistened with sweat. I heard nothing but his

beating breaths.

Just as I was about to pump down on him, Leo thrust himself up into me.

“Fuck!” I hissed, flashing tight grin across my face. “Oh, fuck.”

Leo was cheeky, even during sex. Either that, or he was just too desperate to wait another second.

I moved one hand to his shoulder while the other remained planted flat on the cold cement floor, and started riding, pushing my hips up and down to get a grip on his movements. But every time I thought we had got a predictable rhythm going, Leo either sped up the thrusts of his hips or stopped altogether before continuing, like he was failing to keep a pitched tent.

“What’s wrong?” I said, removing myself from his cock despite the burning, built-up tension in me. “Tell me.”

“I wanna be on top,” he said, his words slurring a bit as he scooted his butt up toward the stair. He smiled at me like he was about to give an apology, and knew I wouldn’t care for it. “This floor’s harder than my dick.”

“That it is,” I laughed, shaking my head at the sound of him dissing himself. He wasn’t wrong. “Turn around.”

Leo stood up, zipping his pants as he turned around. Craning his neck over his shoulder, he lifted his shirt to study the small scratches and bruises over his usually clear, sculpted shoulders.

“Jesus,” he muttered, catching the expression on my face. “Is it that bad?”

“It’s ... not horrible,” I replied, silently cursing myself for forcing him to the ground. “If Elliot asks, you were just trying to do some parkour and fell on the street.”

“So, it is that bad,” Leo said, grinning. “You know how to ride, Kitty Kat. I’ll give you that.”

Rolling my eyes, I picked myself off the floor and started putting myself together again. The fact that neither of us had reached our climax was frustrating, but we had been gone long enough. I didn’t want Elliot returning to an empty apartment—or worse, return alone to my mother.

Once we had gotten our clothes back on our bodies, I turned to face Leo, my hands reaching out to his. Our fingers intertwined within one another’s in romantic connection, as if we hadn’t just had unfinished sex in the abandoned, musty stairwell of our old high school. While Leo’s eyes traced the edges of our knuckles, the receding sweat on our palms, I looked at his lips, rosy pink and chapped.

Without a word, I leaned forward, and touched my lips to his. It wasn’t a kiss, just a symbol of my feelings for him.

Love, not lust.

Compassion.

I cared about him, I did. But while I loved him in the way I loved Felix, loved Pierre—but they would never be able to take Elliot’s place. I didn’t know what it was about him, if there was anything at all worth my affection, other than his lethal smile, the sweet rasp in his voice, the darkness in his eyes, his personality.

I hated it.

Maybe I could change it, change my feelings.

“Let’s go,” I whispered, pulling back from him, keeping one hand locked with his as we started up the steps. “Nothing happened.”

“Nothing.”

The walk back to the apartment took longer than I thought it would. I hoped to God that Elliot hadn’t made it back before we would, but we had been gone long enough. All I could do was gather some courage, ready myself for his decision about Vivian’s plan.

Something told me he knew more about it than I did.

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We made it into the building and up the few floors to make it to the door of my apartment. I rang the bell, and it buzzed from inside. Leo took a step back from me. We waited. No one came.

Just as I was about to ring again, the door swung open. Elliot's bright eyes locked with mine, and sent shivers down my spine. It was as if Leo wasn't even there, like he was a ghost witnessing this moment.

Elliot knew what we had done, and we didn't have to say a word.

"We're gonna do it," he said, looking at me, ignoring Leo's presence altogether. "Your roommate's plan. First meeting is tomorrow."

With that, he stepped aside so that we could enter. It felt weird—no, wrong—for Elliot Lancaster to be inviting me into my own apartment, my childhood home.

"Mom?" I called out, dropping my stuff onto a dining room chair, and shed my coat onto the back of it.

"She isn't here," Elliot said, and I blew out a sigh of relief. "I got back about ten minutes ago. I don't know where she is."

"She probably went to get lunch somewhere," I replied, throwing myself on the sofa, and looked around. The place had changed. There were dirty glasses on the coffee table, a thin, but visible layer of dust on the windowsills. The shades were drawn. I pushed myself off the sofa and went to open them, letting in soft rays of natural light.

Something was up with my mom, and it didn't start with me dragging Elliot and Leo into her personal space.

"Hey," I heard Elliot say, and felt him grasping my shoulders. I turned around to face him, and found his face close to mine. "Can I steal you for a sec?"

Past his shoulders, I could see Leo watching us. Looking at me, he wiggled his eyebrows as he took my previous spot on the sofa, stretching out his legs. He reached for the remote, and turned on the TV.

"How high should I turn the volume?" he asked.

Shaking my head, I took Elliot's hand and pulled him down the hall toward my room. Once we were inside, I turned around and shut the door behind me. It closed with a click.

"So," Elliot mumbled, sliding his hands into his pockets as he walked around my bed. He stopped in front of the wall, where a poster of some celebrity I no longer recognized hung, smiling, leather-jacket and guitar. "This is ... you."

He seemed to nod his approval as his eyes moved to my purple bedspread. His shoes were off, and I caught him scrunching his toes against the shaggy gray carpet.

With one slow step in front of the other, he returned to face me. His eyes moved from my brows down to my own gaze, before slipping to the tip of my nose, and my lips. Without a word, his hands rose to cup my chin.

"Wait," I said, just as his lips hung millimeters away from mine. I raised my hands, put them against his chest and gave it an awkward little pat. "Not right now. What is it you wanted to say?"

Elliot looked at me like I had just spoken in another language. He cocked his head to the side, and pouted.

“Nothing at all,” he murmured, his hand brushing some hair from my face. “I just wanted to ... be with you.”

I raised an eyebrow. I knew where he was going with this, and—big surprise—I wasn’t in the mood to fuck. Again.

Before I could say anything, I heard the familiar jingle of keys and the squeak of door hinges. My mom was back.

“Shit,” I hissed, reaching for my bedroom door. “Of course, she comes now.”

I swung open the door to find myself face to face with her. She clutched her purse with one hand, coat still over her shoulders. It was like the first thing she wanted to do when she returned home was check my bedroom. She expected to find this.

“Out.”

Her eyes speared mine as she took a step back, and continued down the hall, out of sight.

“Fuck,” I muttered, letting out a harsh sigh. My fingers bunched up the hair at my scalp as I turned to face Elliot.

His lips touched mine. His hands were on my shoulders.

My back slammed the door shut.

“Elliot!” I snapped, pushing him off of me. He stumbled back, grinning, and then

advanced toward me again. He came close enough for his hands to skim my waist before I shoved him off again.

“I’ll be quiet,” he purred, stepping so close to me that he had me pinned against the door with nothing but his torso and his voice, which felt and sounded like solid smoke, curling around my throat like a hot chain. “I promise. Kat, please. I need you.”



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“Are you fucking crazy?” I hissed, slapping his hand away as if came up to hold the side of my face. “My mom is here. What the fuck Elliot? What’s gotten into you?”

I managed to turn around, pried the door open and slipped out into the narrow hall before he could make another move. Fuming, I walked over to the living room where Leo was browsing some of the books that lined our small shelf. Without a word, I started getting the room ready, heading first toward the sofa. With a grunt, I tried tugging out the pullout with little success.

“Fuck,” I muttered, putting my hands on my hips. I was angry. Or stressed. Confused. Couldn’t focus on what was going on right in front of me.

I heard the squeak of the metal parts move, and looked up from the floor to see Leo pulling out the mattress with ease. It bounced to the floor. Next, he reached for the pile of sheets and blankets my mom had set aside on the arm of the sofa, and started making the bed.

“I can’t believe you two are sharing a bed,” I laughed, shaking my head, and moved to help him.

“We aren’t.” Elliot walked into the room, and leaned against the kitchen counter. “No way in hell.”

“Fine by me,” Leo replied, his tone even. “I get the whole bed to myself.”

“Then where are you going to sleep?” I said, shooting Elliot a look. “The floor?”

Elliot raised an eyebrow, as if to say, Isn't it obvious?

"With you," he said, and winked. Didn't even try to keep his voice low. My mom was in the other room, for Christ's sake.

That was it. I had it with him.

"Can I talk to you?" I said, though it was more of a demand. I walked over to him, grabbed his arm and pulled him toward the door.

I grabbed my key off the counter just before opening the door, and pulling him out into the hall. Shutting the door behind me, I took in a long, shaking breath. If I wasn't about to burst into flames, then strangling Elliot with my bare hands was my next course of action if he didn't fucking cooperate.

Letting out a breath, I faced Elliot, crossing my arms. He still had that stupid grin on his face, as if he was unaware that anything he did was to piss me off. It was like he and Leo had switched personalities.

So much for having mature conversations. At least Leo had some manners.

"Elliot." My voice sounded bored, I was so done with his shit. "What's wrong?"

Instead of responding, he stepped toward me, his hands clamping themselves on either side of my hips. Just as he was about to lean in, I pushed him back.

"Fuck, Elliot. If my mom doesn't kick you out, I will," I snapped, failing to keep my tone down. "What's going on? Are you just horny? Is that it? Can't you go two days without having sex?"

I was whispering the words now, resisting the urge to scream them at him. Elliot had

no idea what it was like for me—it was evident now. He could stride into any room, any home, in the fucking world, and act like he owned the place. Well, not my home. I wouldn't let him.

He was being rude beyond belief.

When he said nothing, I gave up. It was his choice, not mine.

“Go,” I said, pointing down the hall toward the elevator. I couldn't look him in the eyes. “Now.”

“What?”

I pushed past him and stepped back into the apartment. Before he had the chance to protest, I had his things thrown out into the hall, and the door halfway shut behind me.

“You only want what you want, when you want it,” I said, my voice trembling as I stared back at him. He was shocked, standing still in front of the door, frozen. “But you don't give a crap about what other people feel. That's for sure.”

I closed the door, but as I did, he said something. Part of me wanted to ignore it, ignore him altogether, stand up for myself, for Leo, and turn around.

“Kat,” I heard his voice through the door. “It's Felix. He's part of this.”

Narrowing my eyes, I kept my face to the door, but didn't dare budge.

“He's the one who's responsible,” he said, and I could tell he was pressing his own cheek to the door, trying to make every syllable audible. “He fucked my family up. He and his dad—they're the reason my parents lost all their money.”

“For a good reason, I bet,” I countered. “Your dad’s a jerk at home, Elliot. Can’t imagine he was any better in the real world.”

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That seemed to shut him up. I counted ten seconds before I heard his footsteps go down the hall.

I had been holding a breath in without knowing, and let it out as I turned around to find Leo displaying a goofy grin.

“Just me and you, I guess,” he said, shrugging.

“Do you know what he’s talking about?” I asked, storming over to him. “What does he mean, Felix fucked up his family? How does that make any sense?”

Leo shrugged.

“I know you know more than you act like,” I muttered, turning away from him. God, I couldn’t wait to see Pierre again. He was the only one I could trust. “Whatever.”

The drama could wait. I needed to go check on my mom—make sure she wasn’t blaming herself for raising such a fuck-up of a child.

I started toward the hall, when I heard Leo mumble something under his breath. I paused, keeping my back to him.

My skin went cold as he repeated himself.

“He tried to kill him.”

I turned around to look at him, and felt like I was slipping into a dream, into a

suffocating, deep, dark nightmare.

Another reality.

“Elliot,” Leo said, his fingers fiddling with the fraying threads of the sofa cushion. “He tried to kill Felix’s dad.”

“What?” was all I could muster. “Why? How?”

I didn’t believe this.

Leo shook his head, and took in a harsh breath. This was the first time I had ever seen him on edge—like his words had the power of atomic bombs, and our lives, our sanity, was the battlefield.

“I,” he began, then shook his head. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

He started to push himself up from the sofa, but I was on him in a second, forcing him back against the cushion.

“Leo,” I whispered, “tell me. Now.”

Once he collapsed under my hold, I moved back, giving him the room to breathe. He sucked in a heavy load of air, and looked me dead in the eyes.

“It didn’t start with Mr. Lancaster abusing his wife,” he started, pausing between every other word to take in a gulp of air. “It started with her. And ... with Felix’s dad.”

Putting my hands to my temples, I went to sit down on the sofa beside him, my legs trembling. I couldn’t see straight, couldn’t think straight.

“Sylvia,” he continued, murmuring. “That’s her name, Elliot’s mom. Roy’s his dad. She was cheating on Elliot’s dad with Felix’s dad. It was a secret between the three of them for a while, I guess. But Sylvia didn’t know that Roy knew. He tried to keep it cool, I guess. Hoped that Sylvia would tell him. She never did.”

He paused to take in a breath.

“So, he got angry. He started ... you know. So now, she’s leaving them.”

“So, Felix didn’t do anything then,” I clarified, more hoping it was a correct statement than anything. “Right? Elliot’s mom was cheating on Mr. Lancaster with Felix’s dad. And now she’s leaving. That’s not Felix’s fault.”

“Maybe not,” Leo replied. “But he knew what was going on the whole time and didn’t tell Elliot. He knew before Roy did. Must’ve walked in on them, or something.” He rubbed his eyes. He was getting exhausted just telling me all this. “You’d think a real friend would tell you something like this, ya know?”

“Maybe he had a good reason not to,” I tried.

“Maybe,” he said. “Or maybe his father’s restaurant business was failing, and they needed the money.”

I swallowed.

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“And maybe ...” Leo looked at me with glassy eyes, as if he could feel every inch of my raging conscience. “Maybe part of the reason Elliot’s dad went broke was because Sylvia was doing Felix’s dad a favor. And Felix didn’t say a word, even though he knew everything. I mean, why would he? If he said something, he’d be on the streets. His dad’s restaurant empire would’ve collapsed. They needed the money, and Sylvia could get it for them.”

I nodded, pretending to have accepted it all before the words set in my brain. It was too much, and yet, it made sense. Felix being whisked away to England must have had more to do with Elliot’s wrath than roping him in to the family business.

“Okay,” I said, still nodding. “What about ... the killing thing, though?”

“He—” Leo cut himself off with a hand on his mouth. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

My hands were back on his shoulders in a second, just holding him there, as if I could squeeze the truth out of him.

“Leo,” I enunciated, my eyes drilling his. “Tell me.”

He placed his hands on mine, as if to reassure himself more than me. It was evident that he had been holding these secrets in place for Elliot’s sake, and Elliot’s sake only. It wasn’t doing Leo any good other than put the burden on him.

“You ever wonder why your friend chose England?” he said, his voice making it sound like he was falling into a deep, dark hole. “And why Elliot went to school at Powell?”



“Because his family’s broke,” I said. “I know that. And because Pierre wanted—”

I didn’t know.

“You’re wrong.” Leo’s voice cracked, and he rolled his eyes. “Fuck, that sounded dark. Yes, they don’t have a ton of money, but he’s here because he wanted to frame you. To protect himself.”

“And why would he do that?” I pressed.

“In case,” he continued, “Pierre succeeded.”

A memory flashed through me.

Felix wouldn’t have given me the gift card to C’est Bien if he knew what Elliot was planning to do. He wouldn’t even let me go near Elliot if he knew.

“Elliot commissioned Pierre to kill Felix’s father,” Leo said in one breath. “Seems crazy, but you remember what happened back in high school, don’t you? One night, you came to the park to meet Elliot, and I was there in his place. Pierre showed up with a knife.”

I couldn’t breathe.

“Your friend has a propensity for violence,” Leo whispered. “And Ell has a propensity for revenge.”

“But why would P do that?” I almost screamed at him. “That’s not in him. He wouldn’t do something like that.”

“Anyone can do anything with the right compensation,” he replied. “The money

Sylvia didn't take from the Lancasters? Elliot gave to your friend. You wonder how he's able to live on his own? That's how."

"But P said he's doing homework and shit for a price," I tried. "For Vivian's cousin. I mean, how much did Ell give him?"

Leo snorted. "You think that forging someone else's homework is enough to cover rent in London? Plus, tuition for four years?" He shook his head, but reached out to me to hold my shoulder once he saw the look on my face morph from stunned disbelief to teary anger. "Face it, Kat. Your friend's a liar, and a good one. He told you the truth, but only half of it, and you believed it."

"I don't want to believe it," I muttered, pulling away from him. But his hand held an iron grip, and he pulled me closer to him just so he could whisper in my ear.

"Think about it," he murmured. "You and Pierre both have something against Felix. He bullied you. If the cops found out that it was Pierre who did it, they'd think one of you might come for Elliot's father next. Maybe mine, who knows? Cut off our source of money. Look—"

He was speaking so quickly that his words began to blend together into a dark, sinister drone.

"If it came to that, that's where you'd come in. You'd take the blame, wouldn't you? He'd make you take the blame. That's why he stayed, and Pierre went."

My head was spinning. It was fracturing. I wanted to do one thing, and one thing only—the one thing I should've done months ago, when Pierre had reached out to me, and I didn't respond.

"I just don't understand," I forced out. "Why would Pierre do something like that?"

“For the money,” Leo said. “For the thing he always wanted, but never had.”

He didn’t try to kill himself because he saw that I was with Elliot. He tried to kill himself out of stress, out of pressure—to escape this twisted plot that Elliot had drawn him into.

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“I need to get out,” I said, pushing myself away from Leo and off the couch. My mom was standing in the hall. I wasn’t sure how much she had heard, but I didn’t want to know. Didn’t care.

I just needed to talk to Pierre. Make sure he was alright.

Make sure he wasn’t somewhere he shouldn’t be.

“Kat?” my mom called as I raced for the door. I didn’t respond. She wouldn’t get—couldn’t get it. She couldn’t know about any of this, and nothing she could say would help.

I stumbled out into the hall, and almost collapsed right there before getting my phone out in front of my face to find Pierre’s number.

He had the gift card to C’est Bien. They had let us in once, but now that Felix’s dad knew him, he’d let him in again, even if he was alone. Thanks to Felix’s act of kindness, Pierre knew the way to Mr. Rosenberg’s office. He knew where he would be, and at what time.

My fingers trembled as I scrolled through my contacts, and my blurred vision made it harder and harder to find his name.

Then I remembered something.

The knife in my suitcase.

My phone smacked the floor as I threw my hand over my mouth.

“Elliot,” I whispered, my back sinking down against the wall, my feet dragging against the carpet. The lights in the hall seemed to flicker, but I knew it was the breakdown in my own head that was making my world fall apart in front of my eyes.

It was him.

He put the knife in my suitcase. He set me up. It all made sense.

Just like Leo said—Pierre and I were the only ones who could do something like this to Felix’s family. There was a solid record of me trying to transport a knife through airport security. It was a stupid move, but it was enough to make it look like I was trying to aid Pierre in this insane plan.

Elliot wouldn’t pay for this, because I would. Leo was right.

He agreed to help me to gain my trust, but he never loved me. Elliot had no intention of protecting me. Once again, I was his pawn. He was using me as a scapegoat for murder.

A murder that he didn’t commit, but that he planned.

“Hey.”

I looked to the side just as I pressed the phone to my ear. It rang for a second before Pierre picked up.

He smiled at me. Even though he was a few yards down the hall, I could sense the tears in his eyes, heard it in his voice.

“Hey,” I replied, my voice cracking in that one word. We both laughed, and it felt like a warm gust of wind lifted me up from the floor and pulled me toward him.

A moment later, we were in each other’s arms.

“I thought I’d come a little earlier,” Pierre murmured into my hair, squeezing me so tight like he thought I’d slip away from him if he loosened his grip just a bit. “I thought it was the right thing to do.”

I moved back just enough to look at his face. My hands stroked his cheeks, his bangs, the curve of his eyebrows. My heart was beating so hard I thought it’d tear through me and into his chest, just so it could unite with his own pulse.

“Don’t talk,” Pierre murmured, his lips finding their way to mine. “Just breathe.”

I nodded, my nose nuzzling against his. He was right. We didn’t have to talk. We just had to be together, be there for each other, and we’d be fine. That’s how it always was.

I was stupid to think it could be any other way.

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I woke up like I had so many times before, with the sunlight across my covers, and Pierre at my side.

He was still sleeping by the time I had gotten up, and I took the precious period of time to look at him as he breathed, stroking his dark hair, twirling the silky strands between my fingers.

“I didn’t do it.”

His voice startled me, and the hand I was using to fondle his locks of hair flew to my chest.

He opened his eyes, and looked up at me. “I didn’t do it,” he whispered again, his voice slightly hoarse. “You know what I’m talking about, don’t you?”

I nodded, even though I wished with every fiber of my being that I didn’t. Ignorance—that’s what I needed in my life. Just some blissful ignorance.

“We don’t have to talk about it, but ...” Pierre continued, “I think we should.”

I felt his body shift beside me, and watched as he sat up in my bed, shirt off, his pearly white skin glowing in the heat of the sun. He was wearing the same pair of pants that he was last night, and I was still clothed just the same. We hadn’t done anything. We had gone to sleep beside each other, like good friends forced into the same bed of a hotel room. Innocent.

I pushed myself up beside him, turning my torso to face him. Looking past his

shoulder at my alarm clock, I saw the time. 10 AM.

My mom had let us sleep in, just like that one night in that final week of high school. After Pierre had almost killed himself—for the first time.

Again, it wasn't because he saw me with Leo. Or Elliot. Or Felix.

It was because Elliot had tricked him into gambling his own life just so he could have a shot to improve it. It was money. It was always the money. It was power, it was a drug, it was black magic with the capacity to murder.

And Pierre wanted it. Needed it.

Elliot had it.

"I was gonna do it," Pierre murmured, his warm, tawny eyes meeting mine, melting my heart. "Last night. I was gonna take that stupid gift card and go back to the restaurant, ask to go see Felix's dad, just like we did the night you arrived in London. I could've done it."

"But you didn't," I whispered scooting closer to him so that I could feel his warmth, feel his flesh, as if to make sure he was real, that this wasn't just a dream. "You're here. With me. You're safe."

"And so are you," he replied, his voice as quiet as mine. His lips drifted apart as if to let out a sigh rather than speak a single syllable. "That's all I care about."

I leaned in toward him, my hand skimming his smooth back, feeling the slight soar of his shoulder blade, the curve of his spine. Instead of kissing him, I rested my cheek against his, and my fingers toyed with the small, mossy hairs on the back of his neck.



We breathed against each other, and I felt his breathe slide down the slide of my neck like water, like wind, and down past my collarbone, toward my breasts, which were still constricted beneath a bra and the fabric of my shirt.

“I’m sorry,” I said, feeling the pinch of tears behind my eyes. “I’m so sorry.”

I pulled away from him, and sat up straight, gazing at him dead in the eyes. If they were the windows to the soul, I wanted him in mine. He was the only one who deserved it.

“I want you...” I started, but then my voice choked on the words, and I had to pause to wipe away the tears beading at my eyes. “I want you to be in control.”

Pierre narrowed his eyes at me.

“Do what you want,” I continued, my voice shaking. There was a volcano of emotion inside of me—mostly, it was regret that was pushing its limits. “Do anything you want to me. Everything you want.”

He looked at me as if I was crazy, stupid, anything but honest.

“Please,” I whispered.

Pierre leaned in toward me, and I was sure he was going to kiss me, tell me that he loved me, that he forgave me for all my sins. He was my god, and I was lamenting everything I had let happen to him. Everything in my control, and everything out of it.

He didn’t deserve me, because he deserved better.

His lips moved to my ear, and I closed my eyes at the sensation of his lips brushing

against my skin.

“Turn around.”

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There was something hard in his tone, and I did as I was told, maybe almost too willingly. Facing the wall, I felt his hands on my shoulders, then glide down my back to lift up my shirt. A moment later, he had it off me, and I was left sitting in my bra and pants.

His fingers worked around the clasp at my back, and he slipped my bra off my chest. His hands found their way to my shoulders, and he began massaging in deep, full circles.

I couldn't take it anymore.

"Stop," I said. When he didn't, I turned around and before I knew what I was doing, I grabbed onto his wrists. "This isn't for me," I whispered. "This is for you. Do you understand?"

Removing my hands from his arms, I peeled off my pants, tossed them to the floor, and then my underwear. Now, I was stark naked in front of him. Vulnerable. His.

"I'm yours," I murmured, my eyes probing his. I could never say enough to apologize for the harm I had put him through by choosing Elliot over him—by choosing anyone over him. "Please."

No, I could never say enough. And I didn't want to.

But I could do things for him, things I should've done a long time ago.

His eyes regarded mine for what felt like an eternity as the heat built up between us,

literally, the sunlight stretching farther across the mattress, flowing over my bare thighs, meeting the dark point of my naked, open pussy. I felt like a flower coming into full bloom on a winter day, hot within the safety of a greenhouse, begging to be picked.

Pierre's eyes dipped from mine, traveling carefully down the soft, glowing curves of my body. I wanted him to slice me open, devour me.

"You're right," he murmured, moving his hands to his waist. "Turn back around, and close your eyes."

I did so, and waited for his next move. But there was nothing, except the sound of the door opening and closing. Still, the mattress didn't move. Pierre must've remained beside me.

"Now tell me," I heard him say, so casually it sounded like we were doing nothing but chilling in my room after a long day at school. "What is it you're sorry for?"

"Everything," I breathed.

I felt something over my eyes, as if Pierre was covering them with his hands.

"Everything?" someone repeated, but it wasn't Pierre. I could feel his breath over my ear, his voice smoky, almost bored. "Including me?"

Elliot.

My hands snapped up to his in an instant, my nails digging into his wrists as I yanked them from my face.

"What are you doing here?" I snarled, trying to whirl around to face him just so I

could sock him in the jaw. But he managed to hold me in place, his knees cradling my torso on either side. His hands remained over my eyes. “Where’s Pierre?”

“I’m still here,” I heard him say. He seemed closer to me now, as if he had changed positions on the bed. “And Elliot’s here as a surprise. Don’t worry, it’s something we arranged. Well, kinda.”

Surprise?

“Well, I’m surprised,” I said, trying to sense what was going on in back of me.

Elliot removed his hands from my eyes, and in that second, I looked in front of me find Pierre’s face inches from mine. He raised his hands to cup my face as if to reassure me, a slight smile playing on his lips. Then, he pulled back to lift his shirt. Behind me, I could hear Elliot doing the same.

“What are you doing,” I said, watching Pierre as his toned chest came into my view. “Asking me to choose?”

I couldn’t believe what was happening—Elliot and Pierre occupying the same space, me sandwiched in the middle, without throwing any fists. In fact, both of them seemed calm as could be, which made sense. They knew something I didn’t, and they were here to test me.

“I’m not asking you to do anything,” Pierre replied, drawing closer to me again so that I could feel his knees against mine as I knelt before him. He had taken off his pants, leaving him in his boxers.

“But that’s what you should be doing,” I said, pleading with him as I took his cheeks in my hands, holding him like he was fragile, a child rather than the young man I had grown up beside. “This for you,” I repeated. “For once, you need to do what you

want. That's all I care about, P. You."

"Kat," he whispered. "What I want, is for you to get what you want."

I could feel Elliot's hands skim my neck, twirling my hair, then letting it fall against my back.

"What I want," Pierre continued, "is for you to drown in ecstasy. What I want, is for you to feel so good..." He was leaning into me, now. "...that you feel nothing."

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He rested his chin on my shoulder, and a moment later, I felt Elliot's teeth at the other side of my neck, nipping in small movements, as if he were afraid to touch my skin. Though I tried to hold it in, I let out a small moan—more out of shock than anything—which caused Pierre to start working his tongue along the narrow ridge of my shoulder.

My hands moved to Pierre's hair as his face slipped down between my breasts, taking in a deep whiff of my scent, just as Elliot's tongue moved to the nape of my neck and started down my spine.

"That's all I ever wanted for you," Pierre murmured from between my breasts. "And I want to give it to you."

"But I don't understand," I breathed, managing to fall toward him just as he pulled away to slip his boxers down his legs. "I'm not who you want. You want someone better, P. You know this."

"No, Kat." He was naked in front of me now, and his burning gaze kept me frozen in place as he bent back on his elbows. "You've always been my first choice. Always will be. I'm just afraid I'm not yours—but that doesn't matter," he continued. "I could be your last choice. Maybe not even an option at all. And I'd still do anything for you."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Was Pierre ... accepting Elliot?

Accepting that I could love him, and his own worst nightmare?

“I want you get fucked,” Pierre said, his half-lidded eyes surveying my pristine skin as sunlight doused my chest, “like you deserve. And I can’t do it for you. Not alone.”

There was a slight smirk on the corner of his lips.

“I want to see you feel pleasure. I want to see you feel happiness.”

I shook my head, because he didn’t understand—he didn’t grasp the insanity of his own words. Elliot didn’t love me. He used me, used Pierre, to get what he wanted. I didn’t want to feel anything, not if it was coming from Elliot. Not anymore.

But then again, Pierre didn’t go through with the plan. He didn’t murder Felix’s father. Didn’t even try to.

Maybe something had changed. Maybe Leo was wrong.

“Besides,” Pierre continued, sounding breathless. “Elliot’s not the one who told me to do it.”

I froze, just as I felt Elliot lay his hands on my hips.

“It was her,” Pierre said, his gaze piercing mine. Daring me to believe him, to accept the truth. “Vivian.”

“Shut up.”

I said the two words just before pushing my lips against his—it was an angry kiss, ravenous, fury-filled. I wanted to suck the word “Vivian” from my vocabulary. Never wanted to hear about her again.

I couldn’t process what he was trying to say to me. Vivian asked him to carry out a



murder? Why the hell?

I just wanted to forget.

So, I'd tell him.

"Make me forget," I said, almost spat. "Please. Make me forget any of this ever happened."

On command, Pierre slid himself down to center his dick beneath me, while I felt Elliot's hands on my shoulders. I knew what they were trying to do.

"Wait," I panted. My thighs were gasping for their heat, inching farther apart, begging for their flesh to join mine. "I want you behind me, P. I wanna look Elliot in the eyes as he tells me the truth. The whole fucked-up truth."

"As you wish," I heard Elliot purr in my right ear, his tongue grazing the cartilage. He snaked around me, and I sat up straighter to release Pierre from the cage I had created with my arms and legs. In moments, I felt his hands where Elliot's once were, cradling the tops of my shoulders like he wasn't about to go on the rollercoaster ride of his life. If only he knew how rough Elliot could rock.

Just seeing Elliot's face as he shimmied under me made my pussy wet. It was pathetic. His smirk—that stupid, cunning thing, it charmed the hell out of every living being in high school, including me.

Especially me.

"I wanna slap you so bad," I growled, looking hungrily, desperately over his dark, well-defined brows, his black curls tossed in a glossy fringe around his head, his pure, clear, freckled skin. And finally, his eyes, which were just as devious as his lips.

They said more than words ever could, and combined with his sultry, just-pulled-out-of-bed voice, what he said wasn't just sounds—it was something that shook me to my core, like thunder.

He electrified me.

“Oh, yeah?” Eliot replied, his words slurred. “You wanna slap me? That’s kinky.”

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His hands were running up and down my arms, and even though I was on top, I felt blissfully weak with the view of his chiseled arms. The bandage for the fresh tattoo on his one arm had come off—or rather, he had forced it off for the display—and the black dagger was angled up toward me in its fierce, graceful design. It was a metaphor for one thing, of course—for the thing aimed at the target between my legs.

“P,” I said, realizing something. This wasn’t something he had ever done before. “You really gonna stick that thing in me without lube, or some shit?”

Elliot laughed, and I felt his belly convulse beneath me. His dick nudged the skin just above my pussy, causing me to shiver.

“Don’t worry. We had Leo suck him off before you woke up. Didn’t we?” he said.

“Fuck you,” I snarled, grabbing him playfully by the neck. “Now fuck me.”

“I don’t know,” Elliot responded, lifting his head as if to glance at Pierre. “Should we? Seems like too little foreplay.”

“Or too much,” I said, bending forward so that my tits were pretty much at a right angle to Elliot’s chest, which expanded with each breath he took. His eyes weren’t even on them, to my surprise. They were on mine.

Suddenly, a wave of guilt thrashed through me. It was true. Pierre was right—Elliot was like a drug, or at the very most, just being around him was the equivalent of a mental high. Sure, he had the sex appeal for a number of girls back in high school, but I was lost just by looking at him. And whatever it was, it had lasted for years,

even as I hated his guts for what he did to me.

My ability to love him transcended the hate I had for him. And I wasn't sure I could say the same for Pierre.

"Do it," I seethed.

My teeth bared as I forced my hips down to grind against him. Behind me, I could feel the tip of Pierre's cock grazing the dip between the cheeks of my buttocks. I wanted him, too. I wanted both of them.

If only it could last this way.

"Now."

The last thing I noticed as Elliot entered me was the sound of my own voice.

A deep, animalistic sigh, as if wedging his dick all the way up inside me worked to shove all the air up throat.

Again, and again, and again.

Elliot thrust his hips up at me like he was trying buck me off, and I held on for dear life, my nails digging into his shoulders as he forced my ass sky high. I struggled to keep myself low enough to maintain a rhythm. But I couldn't keep up with his force, or his pace. Even though I had ridden him once before, my lack of practice was obvious. It wasn't like working Leo. Elliot was his own beast. He didn't just want to show me a good fuck. He wanted to show me what true love felt like.

It didn't take me long to realize that I was missing some action backstage. Pierre was clinging to my waist, his dick humping me from behind with little force. The whole

effort was kind of hilarious—at least he was making the effort.

“I need a little help here, P,” I wheezed, craning my neck to try to catch a glimpse of his expression. “I need you.”

Those three words seemed to do the trick. I felt Pierre’s grip on my waist tighten, and I flexed my legs wider to prepare for his entrance.

His dick thrust its way into me, forging a new path, a precarious journey. And it hurt like hell.

“Fuck,” I exhaled, and felt Pierre freeze up behind me. Elliot continued to work his hips against me, slower than before. “What are you doing? Keep going.”

“But it sounds like it hurt,” Pierre muttered.

“I don’t care.”

With that, Elliot’s dick thrust up into me one more time before I felt Pierre push me down from inside. This time, the pain meshed with the pleasure of Elliot’s movements—and the combination of the two sent my body wild. Feeling, pure invasive emotion, rocked through me. Pierre was right. This is what I needed.

Both of them.

I wanted their pain, their joy, their hurt. I wanted to feel it, all of it, in me.

“Tell me why you’re lying,” I breathed, letting my head fall into the side of Elliot’s neck as he continued to pound me.

“What do you mean?”

“Leo,” I said, and let out a moan as both boys started to pick up the pace. “He told me about your plan. Having Pierre do your dirty work.”

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Another breathy moan escaped my lips. The three of us had established a steady pace—Elliot’s dick shooting me up for Pierre’s to plunge me back down. I wasn’t fucking, I was being fucked. Raw and simple pleasure and pain was my recipe for ecstasy.

“The only dirty work I’ve had him do is what he’s doing right now,” Elliot whispered, his lips moving against my earlobe. “And it’s for you. Not me.”

“Leo said you bullied him,” I continued. “Why?”

The only sound that Elliot made in response was a series of grunts as he rammed his hips up harder into me. Once he did this, I could feel Pierre growing frustrated. All of a sudden, his dick pushed my ass down twice as fast as Elliot was from beneath me. The pace was changing, in Pierre’s direction, at his will. In a matter of seconds, my body became a battleground for dominance between these two men.

“He did.”

Pierre’s chin was hooked over my shoulder, and I could feel his stomach arch over my back in a tight embrace.

“How do you know?” I replied.

“Felix,” he said. “He got in touch with me after ...” He let out a ragged breath as he pushed himself deeper into me. “The library. Texted me to tell me about Elliot. And Leo. Everything. Why you shouldn’t trust him.”

“Bullshit.” Elliot’s hand moved up the center of my stomach, and his fingers began to work at my breasts. “Of course he would say that. We hate each other. He stole from my family. Destroyed us.”

“And you destroyed Leo,” I pushed back. “You destroyed Pierre. Me. Who knows how many other people you’ve hurt, just because ...”

“Because he’s evil inside,” Pierre hissed from in back of me. “Because he likes to hurt people. Plain and simple.”

“You’re wrong,” Elliot retorted. “You don’t know anything about me. You don’t know why I did the things I did.”

“So tell us,” I spat. My hands found his face and cupped it on either side. I stared into his eyes, which looked like they were watering. “Please.”

“He’s right,” Elliot drawled. “It is plain and simple. Has to do with a little something called insecurity and envy. Of you.”

“What do you mean?” I could barely get the words out as I felt my pleasure building into a climax. “You’re jealous of me?”

“No. I loved you,” he said, his arm hooking around my neck to pull it down toward him so that he could speak the words to me, and me alone. “I was jealous because you were from a different world, and I couldn’t be a part of it.”

My thighs trembled as his hips gave me one final shove, and Pierre did the same. That did it. I collapsed across Elliot as I came, and felt both boys follow my lead. My whole lower half felt soaked in hot, sticky bliss, their scent overwhelmingly masculine, marking me as their territory. Each got me in my entirety. Maybe it was selfish, but I didn’t want it any other way.



I could hear Elliot's heart beating through his chest, feel its pulse under my cheek while Pierre's own face rested against my shoulder, his breath whispering into my ear with no sounds, just feelings. Both boys' cocks were still wedged within me, warm, keeping me anchored to that feeling of ecstasy.

Elliot's words ran through my head again, and this time, I tried to give them some kind of empathy.

"A different world, meaning..." I said, lifting my head up, my tits peeling off his chest like his sweat was glue. "... my background. Not the high school we went to together."

Still lying beneath me, Elliot shook his head. "You wouldn't have liked me, back then. You hated me before I even spoke to you. Before I did anything."

I rolled my eyes at his comment. Maybe there was a sliver of truth to that—he was the rich, popular boy that kept chasing girls who weren't me. Of course, I had some resentment toward him. I jealous for him before he was jealous for me.

"So, you liked me before you pretended to hate me," I said, lifting my finger to trace the soft edges of his lips, and let his teeth graze my nail. "Love turned to insecurity, which turned to jealousy, to hate. And back to love again."

"You said it, sweetheart," Elliot murmured, his eyelids fluttering as if he were getting pulled into a deep sleep. "And I'm sorry."

"You should be," Pierre said from behind me. I let out a soft yelp as he pulled his dick out from behind me in a slow, almost languid movement, as if to say, You don't know how it was until it's gone. "You fucking bastard."

"Care to elaborate?" Elliot responded. Even though he closed his eyes, I could tell he

was only doing it to refrain from releasing too much pent-up anger. “Because you would’ve killed a guy just to get money.”

“It wasn’t just for money,” Pierre hissed, removing himself from the mattress. “Wasn’t just for me.”

“Then what was it for?” Elliot pressed, pushing himself up with his elbows so that he could look past me. I shimmied over to the opposite side of the bed, and tried to breath even. “Spit it out.”

“For Kat.” Pierre was sitting on the edge of the bed, his eyes glued to the floor. “I thought that maybe ... if I had what you had, then she’d love me. That you,” he lifted his head and gazed at me, “would love me. I mean, how could you ever love a broke, mentally-ill loser like me when you already take shit from a more attractive asshole with money?” Pierre let out a snort. “I mean, you go after the shit you don’t deserve, right? That’s what everyone says. The good girls go for the bad boys because they’re bad, but they make up for it with their fucking Corvettes and their Ralph Lauren and shit. Maybe I wanted to show you that my flaws could be just as enticing if I wasn’t so strapped for cash. If I was stable on the outside, even if I wasn’t on the inside.”

“P,” I said, and drew in a long breath. “You know I’d love you no matter what. But if anything, having an empty wallet and mental breakdowns aren’t flaws.” I paused for a moment to dab at my eyes. “Killing a man to prove your loyalty to me is.”

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“But I didn’t do it,” Pierre shot back.

“I know.” I left the bed, and started pulled back on my clothes. “But you wanted to. That’s what matters.”

I had to say it. There was no excuse for what he had wanted to do. He could say he loved me all he wanted, that he would only do it for me. But that wouldn’t cut. Not in my world, not in anyone else’s. I watched as both boys glanced at each other before moving to replace their clothes over their own bodies. Even though fucking had let off some steam, years of pain wasn’t evaporating so easily.

“We should go,” Elliot said, looking at me. He zipped his pants up, but her shirt was still off, his chest gleaming with sweat. His hair looked as if he’d been riding eighty on a motorcycle with no helmet. “The NA meeting starts soon.”

“Seriously?” I glared at him. “You’re really falling for her shit? What else is she making you do, other than trying to get people killed and pretend you’re a junkie?”

I let out a huff, putting my hands on my hips as I continued to look at him.

“I mean, are you even certain that she’s going to hand over any money to you at all? This all seems like a ploy to get money from Felix’s family for herself. She’s using you.”

“Why would she do that?” Elliot muttered, reaching for his jacket. “She has enough of her own.”

“Then why would she make you plan to kill Felix’s dad?” I tried to keep my voice level, even though I knew there was no one else in the house. My mom was at work, and Leo ... I didn’t care where he was. Didn’t care if he was listening. “There’s something more going on here, can’t see that?”

“Does it matter if there’s more going on?” Elliot said. His voice was low, tired. “All I care about is getting my family back together. And she’s promised to get my father’s savings back as long as I help her out.”

I moved toward him, putting my hands on his shoulders, trying to get him to look me in the eyes.

“Elliot,” I murmured. “Listen to me. You can’t solve your family’s problems. You don’t have to burden yourself with that.”

Before Elliot could say anything more, I heard heavy footsteps approaching us. Pierre bumped Elliot with his shoulder as he walked past us, headed for the hallway.

“You’re a fucking cliché, Kat,” he muttered. Pierre yanked open the door. And slammed it behind him just as I turned.

“Excuse me?”

Narrowing my eyes, I yanked open the door and started after him. Just before he could leave the apartment, I grabbed onto his wrists and pinned him against the door, my gaze burning into his.

“You think you can save a bad boy from his sins, is that it?” Pierre breathed. “You see right through his tough outer shell. No one else understands him but you. Well, guess what—you can’t change the fact that he ruined our lives, and who knows how many others’.”

He took in a deep breath.

“I love you,” Pierre murmured, “but I can’t watch you come apart because of him. That’s all I wanted to say.”

He opened the door, and staggered into the hallway, pulling the door shut behind him with a heavy rattle. Drawing in a breath, I turned to face Elliot, putting my hands to my temples.

Pierre was right, of course. He knew me too well not to be.

But I couldn’t change my feelings, no matter how much he wanted me to. At least now he was accepting it with a chip on his shoulder. That’s as good as it was going to get.

“All right,” I muttered, sniffing as I forced my eyes up to meet Elliot’s. “Where’s this meeting at?”

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The Dean of Students was the first one in the empty room on the second floor of the students' center. Her foot was tapping the floor in impatience as we entered, but if anything, we were right on time. I wasn't surprised to see that Vivian herself was still absent.

"At least someone is keeping their word," Dean O'Donnell said, glancing at Elliot and then down at the clipboard in her lap. She made a note of our presence. "I bet you both ten bucks this princess will show."

"I bet two," I said, smiling at her. Props to the woman for putting up with our shit. At least she had a sense of humor. "Where should we sit?"

The Dean gestured to the circle of chairs. She sat in one a few feet away from the circle, as if hoping not to get too involved with the impending drama.

Elliot and I took our seats in the circle, and sat there in silence until we heard the door open and close behind us. We turned our heads to find a couple students walk in, people I've never seen before, who were probably here because they actually needed the help and were totally unaware of Vivian's front. Thinking about the truth made me sick—that she would ditch the group as soon as she got what she wanted, and leave these kids hanging. Even if she continued to host them, I doubted she'd put in any effort.

"Hey," I whispered, leaning toward Elliot as the kids took their seats. "Is Leo gonna show?"

He shrugged. "I doubt it."

There were four of us, now. Another minute later, Tara entered the room, and made eye contact with me. She seemed to freeze in place out of shock, or anxiety, before taking another step.

“Hey,” I said, standing up from my seat before she could sit down. “I need to talk to you.”

For a moment, she didn’t respond, just staring at me with those wide doe eyes, as if she didn’t recognize me, as if I were the one who had changed and not her. When I crossed my arms, showing I wasn’t going to take no for an answer, she nodded and turned back to the door.

I followed her out into the hall. Once we were out of earshot from anyone in the room, I turned to her.

“What’s going on?” I asked, trying to sound as patient, as understanding, as possible. As if a thousand things weren’t already bombarding my conscience. “I saw you three in the diner. Are you friends with her now? And Eric? What the hell, Tara?”

Tara glanced past my shoulder and fidgeted, probably afraid to see Vivian walking down the hallway and overhearing us. I guessed the coast was clear, because she looked back at me and stepped closer.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “It’s just ... it’s complicated. I told you the story. We were best friends back in school, when we were young, like ... really close. It’s just ...” She took in a trembling breath. “I know it doesn’t look like it, but she’s hurting. I know from my own experience what she’s dealing with. She can’t admit it to herself, but she’s addicted. She’s got problems. And I thought I could help.”

“Cut the bullshit,” I said, narrowing my eyes at hers. “She’s taking something from you. Using you.”

“I’m serious,” Tara snapped back, which took me by surprise. “I didn’t tell you the whole story, you know,” she said, and let out a heavy breath as she looked past my shoulder again. “She started using pretty young. There’s no doubt that it messed her up. But she didn’t used to be this way. Look,” Tara sighed. “I know how this sounds. But I feel like I can help her. Get her back to the way she used to be. She’s good inside, Kat. I know you can’t see it, but I know she is. V just needs help.”

“You’re calling her V, now?” I let out a snort, and shook my head. The way she was trying to defend her so-called best friend reminded me of what Pierre told me just hours ago. “Look,” I started, “just because you think you know somebody doesn’t mean you can save them. Believe me, I’ve been there.” I closed my eyes, and took in a deep breath. “There’s something else at stake here. I saw her give you an envelope, back at the diner. What is it?”

Tara pressed her lips into a thin smile, as if she relieved I hadn’t raised my voice or called her a fake friend. She was torn, and innocent. And I cared about her. I’d hear her out.

“Fine,” she whispered again. “She’s helping me out, if you know what I mean. I could get into art school after all. I mean,” she continued, her tone growing more excited, “she said she could get me into a school in Manhattan. Can you believe that? She’s giving me the chance to leave this shithole of a school and actually start my life.”

“And you do what?” I wasn’t buying any of this. “Be her lapdog? Did she tell you to stop talking to me? Are you plotting to ruin my life now, too?”

Tara bit her lip, and I noticed her eyes were starting to turn glossy, as if she were trying to stop the flow of tears.

When she didn’t say anything, I let out a long breath, and tried to ease up my tone.



“You know what,” I began, “I know going to art school is important to you. And if she’s genuinely going to help you get there, then so be it.” I leaned in. “But if I were you, I’d think about how and when to draw the line. Because that’s a lot of fucking debt to pay. You’re like her slave. Is that what you want?”

I didn’t even want to mention Eric, the fact that he was probably cheating on her with Vivian the same way he cheated on me. In an emotional sense, at least.

Before she could reply, I whipped my head around at the sound of high-heels smacking the tile floor. It to be Vivian coming around the corner.

Without another word, we hurried back into the conference room and took our seats before Vivian strode into the room. The scent of Vivian’s perfume, sweet enough to give anyone a cavity, flooded into the room and invaded my nostrils. I struggled to keep in a row of sneezes.

Tara sat straight across from me, Vivian to her side. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it, but something about Tara was ... different. She was dressed the same, sort of hippie fashion, but the way she avoided my gaze wasn’t like her. Tara was my friend. Sweet, kind. Why would she act like she didn’t know me?

Rolling my eyes, I turned my attention to the Dean as she cleared her throat.

Whatever. There was probably nothing wrong.

“My name is Pat O’Donnell,” the Dean said. “Welcome to Freeman’s first Narcotics Anonymous group. While I’m not leading the discussion taking place here today, I am a liscensed counselor, and so am here to supervise and offer sponsorship if any of you are interested.”

She paused, looking at Vivian.

“I trust Miss Russo will make your time here worthwhile,” she finished flatly.

With that, we turned our attention to Vivian. She hardly looked like she wanted to be here, and the couple of students who showed up without her direct invitation looked genuinely confused that she was the one leading this thing. Whether or not she was truly addicted to substances, I didn’t know—but the fact was, the school thought she was, which meant that she had to play the part.

Except, she wasn’t.

“Okay, so, thanks for coming, I guess,” she started, flipping some hair over her shoulder. “So, like, the goal is to keep coming to these meetings, according to the handbook. And ... yeah. Who wants to go first?”

We all looked around at each other, until one of the new kids raised their hand.

“Uh,” they said, “what’s the question?”

I would’ve felt the second-hand embarrassment for Vivian if it weren’t for her complete lack of caring. She barely seemed like she was here at all, let alone communicating whole thoughts.

“What helps you stay clean,” she said, like knowing how these meetings were run was a fact of life. “What else?”

It was obvious she didn't want to be here. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the Dean cross her legs and lean in. I wasn't the only one taking note.

"Shouldn't we introduce ourselves first?" I added. "Or is that not part of the program?"

"All right, Kath-leen," Vivian scoffed, sharing a look with Tara. "You go first."

Raising my eyebrows, I adjusted myself in my seat. Way to spoil my turn.

"Okay. My name's Kathleen. Call me Kat," I started. "I'm a freshman."

I looked toward Elliot. When he said nothing, I had to nudge him with my elbow before he realized we were doing some active participation. Jeez, if I were Vivian, I don't know if he'd deserve the money. Not that her own act was any better.

"Oh, hey," he said. "I'm Elliot. I go to Powell, actually. Freshman."

The other students introduced themselves, and when it came to Tara, I held my breath.

"Hey, my name is Tara," she said, fidgeting a bit in her seat, shyly tucking a lock of her long blonde hair behind her ear. "I'm a freshman. This is my first time attending one of these, so I'm excited. I never considered myself an addict, or that I had a problem, but I've been using for a long time. Weed, mostly, but you know, it doesn't always do the trick." She paused to share a quick, solemn glance with me. "I'm looking forward to getting to know everyone. Thanks."

She had no idea I was going to be here. I could tell. And she had no idea that this was all just some show—that Vivian had fooled her into thinking this was real. What a shitty thing to do to someone who actually needed the help.

“So,” Vivian said, puffing out her chest as she straightened up in her chair, like she were a bird ruffling up her feathers. “I stay clean by doing other things, like talking to friends, family ... sex.”

One of the other students let out a short cough—or at least, it sounded like a cough, but any seasoned liar would know that they were trying to cover up a laugh. Which I totally understood, because Vivian sounded like an idiot. Even Tara gave her a side glance, as if to say, Really?

“Hey, how about we cut to the chase,” I said, leaning forward in my chair, looking directly at Vivian. “Pierre. Felix. Elliot.” Her eyes narrowed. “What do you want from them?”

I could hear the Dean shifting again in her chair, but she didn’t dare say anything. This conversation, confrontation, needed to happen out in the open with a witness. She knew us well enough to understand that much.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Vivian responded. She was going to have to try harder than that.

“Elliot told me that you planned to have my best friend murder a guy. For what?” I said, sitting back in my chair. “So, either he’s lying, and he’s behind this whole thing, or he’s telling the truth. Which is it, Vivi?”

“Okay, um,” one of the students said, slowly getting up from their seat. “I think I should go ...?”

“No,” Vivian said, tensing up in her seat. The kid froze just as he was about to leave. “Everyone stays, I tell the truth, and whatever we say in this room stays in this room. Those are the rules agreed to coming in here, right?”

Her eyes zeroed in on the Dean. Technically, she was right. People could say whatever they wanted here—but did that rule apply to confessing to murder?

“My family has a lot of influence,” she continued slowly, her gaze making its way around the room. “If any of you leave before we’re done, you’ll be sorry.”

“Jesus,” one of the other kids muttered. “I thought this was supposed to get me off drugs, not want me to take more.”

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“I second that,” Elliot said. “Anyone have a blunt? I have a lighter.”

“There will be no drug-taking here,” the Dean interrupted, just as Elliot was reaching into his pocket.

“That’s kind of the point,” Vivian said, through a tight jaw. “Let’s get back to the matter of staying clean, shall we?”

“She’s lying to you,” I said, looking to the other two students. “This meeting is a joke. She doesn’t care about getting clean. She’s hosting one bogus meeting and then paying off Ms. O’Donnell here to keep up the charade on paper.”

The Dean drew in a sharp breath.

“Look,” I said. “You tell the truth here, now, and I’ll keep your secret safe. I won’t tell a soul outside of this room. You’ll get the hours you need to keep your admission to Freeman without having to do a thing.”

Of course I didn’t mean it. But compromise had to start somewhere.

Vivian took in a deep breath, her eyes flitting all around the room, everywhere but my eyes.

“Fine,” she said, though it came out like a whimper. “He’s right. It was me.”

Elliot clapped his hands together and slouched way back in his seat, looking like he’d just been cured of cancer.

“I told you,” he exclaimed, turning to me. “See? I told you.”

Rolling my eyes, I ignored his bout of happiness and kept my focus on Vivian.

“That still doesn’t explain why you bullied Leo,” I said. “Or why he would tell me that you were the one who planned this out. Put me and Pierre in danger of being accused of murder. Vivian didn’t even know you guys until a few months ago, and barely.”

“Me bullying has nothing to do with this,” Elliot said, his tone turning dark. “Besides, it was in middle school. It’s over.”

“Obviously, it has a lot to do with this,” I objected. “He has a grudge against you. Ell, you think you can just beat the shit out of someone mentally, and they won’t get scars that last their whole life?” My words grew sharp. “Just because it’s over doesn’t mean you can act like it never happened. Anyway, Leo has something against you. He’s angry. And it’s evident he’s not afraid to use his anger to get revenge.

Elliot regarded me for a few long moments, and his silence spoke louder than words. He knew I was right.

“You have a pattern,” I continued. I was on a roll now, everything I had wanted to say to him bubbling to the surface. “Your family’s a wreck. It always has been. And you take your rage out on Leo, on me, on Pierre ... on anyone who can take it.”

I swallowed.

“Justify it any way you want, but that’s the truth. I know it is. And now, it’s coming back to bite you.”

Elliot bit his lip.

“Leo isn’t like us,” he started. “Like me, like Felix. His family doesn’t have money. In fact, he’s probably the poorest little shit I ever knew growing up. He was homeless for a while. Sixth grade, I think. That’s why I bullied him,” he said, his voice choking up, just enough for me to tell. “Because even though his family was living on the street, they were happy together. And maybe the egotistic little rich brat inside of me didn’t want that for him, for anyone. Okay?”

“Stop,” I muttered, bending forward to put my head in my hands. “You were a kid with a broken family.”

“Exactly,” he said, shifting in his seat. This NA meeting was proving to me more helpful for us than I had thought. “Now you know.”

The room fell into a strange silence, because I knew for a fact that even though no one spoke, everyone’s minds were reeling. At least, mine was. The thoughts, the voices, wouldn’t stop coming. I still needed answers.

“Anyway,” I started again. “Whether we like it, or not, Leo has something against you, and now, so does Felix. They have Pierre convinced that you’re the one behind this stupid plan.” My eyes shot back to Vivian. “That you have every reason to want to get back at Felix’s family for taking your dad’s fortune. I want to believe you don’t, Ell. I really do. You have to tell me the truth. Prove it to me.”

“Fine.” Vivian took in a sharp breath. “If I tell the truth, here, now, all of you have to swear that you won’t speak about any of this once we leave this room. And—” She locked eyes with the Dean. “We’ll continue meeting here once a week for an hour until the school year is over. Deal?”

She said the word ‘meeting’ gesturing with air quotes.

“Or what, missy?” O’Donnell said. “You’ll fire me?”



“Someone will,” Vivian said with a shrug. “Someone I know. Someone who’s name starts with ‘President’ and ends with ‘of the University’. Just because the Russos are from California doesn’t mean we don’t have our connections on the East Coast.” She smiled sweetly. “If you know what I mean.”

The Dean bristled at her remark, but said nothing. Still, I could tell just exactly what was going through her head.

Fucking rich kids.

Vivian turned her attention back to me. “Pierre’s a sweet boy. But he’s guillible as hell,” she began. “Leo was the one who reached out to me. Told me your friend would be good for the job, you know, considering he’d been pretty rejected by his best friend multiple times. Especially after her saw that video of you fucking his mortal enemy. I had Luna get in contact with him. He’s basically in love with her now, to some extent, but some is enough to gain his trust. She’s the one who got him to accept this task.”

I listened impatiently, trying not to let the anger show on my face.

“The thing is, the Rosenberg restaurant conglomerate is going under anyway. Felix’s father is in a ton of debt to investors, my parents included. See, Pierre was never going to kill Mr. Rosenberg. He thought he was. Mr. Rosenberg was going to offer Pierre money to help him fake his death, and leave my parents the rest in the will. We would give half to Elliot’s family, and we’d keep the other half. This way, Mr. Rosenberg would be able to have an escape, start over. He wouldn’t need to face the other investors. He could just ... go. We offered him this option, and he took it. My parents get their money back, Elliot gets his family back, the Rosenbergs get to run away from their problems, and I get to keep my place here at a university that my family basically runs behind the scenes. I get to do whatever I want, and not do whatever I want, and still end up graduating with a four-year degree. Not bad, if you ask me.”

My jaw almost dropped. Literally. And I thought Elliot was diabolical.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Vivian continued with a casual sigh, as if she had already explained this a hundred times to us before. “I’m insane. Entitled. Sadistic. But you have to respect that this was all my plan. My doing. It’s not easy to coordinate a masterplan when you’re high and trying to have a good time.”

For the first time since I sat down, I slouched back in my chair, suddenly too tired, too in awe, to stay tense any longer. She was right, in a way. I had to respect that amount of effort she had put into this. I could never do it.

It was too messed up for words.

“So, Pierre didn’t go to ‘kill’ Mr. Rosenberg,” Elliot said. “Which means he’s not in hiding. There’s no money.”

“No money for you,” Vivian corrected. “He’s going bankrupt. My family’s still owed something, though not as much as we would’ve gotten had he ‘died.’ Who knows, maybe in the future Mr. Rosenberg will ‘die’ of natural causes. If that happens, we can talk.”

She stood from her chair, and stretched.

“Wait,” Elliot snapped, jumping up from his own seat to face her. “You can’t do this. I’m not just gonna get up and leave without getting what you promised me.”

“You got the truth,” Vivian said, looking to me. Then her eyes moved to him. “And you got a target off your back. You lost nothing. You should be happy.” She stepped past him, leaving Elliot stunned. I was surprised he didn’t lunge at her. She headed toward the door, and was about to open it. But before she turned the knob, Vivian looked back at us, and smiled the most wicked smirk I’d ever seen.

She pure, evil genius, and she knew it.

“I’ll see you all next week,” she said, and then put her hand to her mouth as if she had misspoken. “I mean, you will all see each other. I won’t be here. But, you know, I’ll be here in spirit. Right, Dean?”

“Can’t believe this,” I heard her mutter under her breath.

“Three people minimum, remember?” Vivian called over her shoulder as she swung open the door. “I can count on you three, right Tara? Elliot, Kath-leen.”

With that, she stepped out into the hall with a bounce to her step, and the door squealed shut behind her, leaving us in suffocating, burning silence.

Fuck.

I turned to look at Elliot, and winced at his expression. I’d never seen him look this way—complete disbelief, distress, as if he knew that for the first time in his life, he was a microscopic fish in an ocean that wasn’t his own. Currents he couldn’t control, that, if anything, were forcing him to the bottom.

And for the first time in my life, I truly felt pity for him. His family was falling apart, his two only friends were turned against him, and now he was forced to come to these meetings for God knew how long. To top it off, Vivian had everyone convinced he could be a killer. Or, at least, someone who wanted others to kill for him.

When I looked up, I noticed that everyone had left the room, Tara included. It was just us.

I reached out to grasp Elliot’s hand in mine.

“You have me,” I whispered, turning my body to face his. “I’m on your side.”

After a moment, I felt his hand squeeze mine.

“Yeah,” he muttered, reaching up to wipe the growing moisture from his eyes. “I have you.”

I leaned my head against his shoulder, and just let the moment pass over us. Something had to be done, and we both knew it. We had to set the record straight. Vivian could lord over our lives forever.

She was capable of asinine things, it was obvious. She wouldn't stop here.

“What do we do?” I said after a few minutes had gone by. “I'll do whatever it takes to make things right.”

Elliot shook his head.

“We do nothing.”

“I don’t believe that,” I said, tightening my grip on his hand. “Doing nothing? That’s not who you are. I know that. You know that.”

He nodded, and sat back in his chair, letting out a long sigh as he closed his eyes. After a moment, he let out a short laugh.

“You’re right,” he said. “We’ll think of it this way. You’re the new Vivian. She’s the new Kat. What would Vivian do to get revenge on someone who’s a threat?”

My eyes widened at him.

“A threat?” I repeated. “That’s why you think she hates me so much? She thinks I’m a threat?”

“Yeah.” Elliot opened his eyes and turned his body to face me, raising his hand to cup my cheek. He ran his index finger along my jaw and then beneath my chin, lifting my head just so slightly as if to inspect my skin like it was some precious relic, something rare, fragile. “You’re not like the other girls.”

“Fuck you,” I laughed, sticking out my tongue to lick at his finger as it came to rest on my lip.

“Seriously,” he murmured, allowing me to curl my tongue around his index finger. “You’re smart, hot, kind ....” He smirked. “Well, most of the time.”

“Go on.”

Elliot leaned toward me, resting his left arm along the back of my chair. His scent flooded over me, and that alone was enough to dampen my pussy, tease my imagination. Fucking him and Pierre was a twisted fantasy, something my body wanted that I gave into. And it was everything, literally everything, I needed.

But having Elliot alone, to myself ... that was something I still missed.

“You’re fierce,” he continued. “You’re brave. Honest. That’s why I love you, and that’s why you’re gonna beat her.”

My heart skipped a beat.

“You love me?” I whispered.

I expected him to crack some joke about how the words that slipped out of his mouth was an accident, backpedal that sacred sentiment. But instead, he leaned forward, and rested the side of his nose against mine, his forehead supporting my own.

“I love you,” he murmured. “I don’t know why, I don’t know how, but I love you, Kat. I’ve always loved you.”

I couldn’t help it. A smile spread across my lips just as tears nipped at my eyelids. Those words coming out of his mouth were my definition of bliss. Happiness. Whatever the fuck you wanted to call it, that’s what I felt.

“I love you, too,” I said. “And I hate her.”

“Then we’re on the same page,” Elliot replied, his lips brushing against mine, his breath smooth, minty, invading my lungs. “What do you want me to do?”

I waited a beat, then an idea popped into my head.

“What if we joined forces?” I said. “You want your family’s money back, and I want to help you get it. If anything, she needs to be put in her place. She can’t run this school forever, because then she’ll run our lives.” Elliot nodded. “We destroy her from the inside. Befriend her, earn her loyalty. Then show her where she stands.”

“You sound evil,” he purred, his teeth tugging lightly at my bottom lip. “I love it.”

I drew back from him, and stood up. The abrupt movement caused him to dip forward before steadying himself, realizing I had removed myself from his touch.

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s get out of here.”

“And go where?”

I reached out my hands and pulled him up to his feet. “Starts with ‘my’ and ends with ‘bedroom’.”

“Again?”

“We’ll go to my dorm room this time,” I said, winking. “There we can be alone. After that, we have some thinking to do.”

“I can think and fuck at the same time,” Elliot replied. “If that’s what you mean.”



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“Whatever works,” I responded, hooking my arm around his shoulders as we left the room and entered the main hallway of the student center.

I was serious about what I said. I loved him, and I wanted to ruin another girl’s life to save my own. It was an eat or be eaten world out here in Freeman, and I wasn’t going to come out on the bottom. Not like I did in high school.

At least now, I had a veteran bad boy on my side.

“You’re something, Kat. You know that?” Elliot said as we passed groups of students looking after us like we were some celebrity power couple. “You continue to surprise me.”

“Good,” I said. “Because you’ll have to brace yourself.”

“Ell?”

All of a sudden, Elliot stopped in his tracks, yanking me to a halt beside him. Confused I looked around, wondering if Vivian had decided to make a return.

“Fiona?” Elliot gasped, his arm dropping from my shoulders.

In another second, he was yards ahead of me, in another girl’s embrace. I couldn’t process what was happening—so I just stood there, blinking like an idiot, envy building up within me.

After what felt like an eternity, Elliot finally turned back around and called over to

me. “Kat, this is Fiona,” he said, his hand still on the small of her back. “My old friend. She’s the one who did this bad boy.” He pointed to his dragon tattoo.

“Oh,” I said, making my way over to them. The girl was pretty—too pretty. If anything, her long, dark hair and piercing, gray-green eyes make it seem like they were siblings more than anything, but her alternative sense of style—nose piercings, full-sleeve tats and all—made it clear she had grown up anywhere but in Elliot’s household. She seemed older, as if she had recently graduated from college. “Nice to meet you.”

The girl ignored my formality, and turned to pinch Elliot’s cheeks.

“God, I’ve missed you, you little punk,” she said.

“What are you doing here?” he responded, blushing. “I mean, it’s been years.”

“Just wanted to see you,” she replied with a shrug. “When I heard my best friend was in a shitload of trouble, of course, I had to swing by. Someone told me I’d find you here. An NA meeting? Ell, I knew you’d follow in my footsteps.”

I watched their exchange for a few more minutes until it felt like my patience would burst in the form of swears.

“So, what are you doing here?” I blurted, without giving a fuck of how petty my voice sounded. “I mean, you aren’t going to school here, are you?”

Fiona paused her banter to look me up and down just like Vivian had done the first time I met her. Like she was sizing me up, seeing just how much I’d put up a fight, if I’d dare defend myself against someone as great as her.

And yet, she smiled, like she’d known me for years.

“I’m sorry,” she said, reaching out her hand to shake mine. “I haven’t seen this kid in forever,” she said, nodding to Elliot. “I’m a family friend. I’ve been travelling around for a bit. My folks said it’s time for me to get a real job or some shit, so I’m back here trying to get a tattoo apprenticeship with one of the local shops.” Her possessive air seemed to dissipate as she talked, as if realizing that I was one of the good ones. “So, you two are together? That’s cute,” she continued. “I’ve heard so much about you. Be good to him, okay?”

I pressed my lips into a grin, trying to mirror hers. I didn’t know what to say. It was hard to get a read on her—but something told me she was putting on a persona. It was obvious they had a long history together ... and a positive one. A history that didn’t involve as much conflict. As much emotional abuse.

And I was envious of that.

“Hey, I’ll catch you later, Fiona,” Elliot finally said, stepping back to my side. “Let’s meet up tomorrow, maybe?”

“Yeah,” she said, already heading back toward the exit. She blew an air kiss over her shoulders before meeting my eyes for the first time. “Get a good night’s sleep, Ell. We have a lot of catching up to do.”

Elliot laughed nervously, and turned back to me as she went out of sight.

“Sorry,” he said, his lips still grinning wide. “Fiona’s, like, my closest friend. We haven’t seen each other in a while. She’ll be staying here for a while.”

“A while?” I said, hating how possessive I sounded. “Closest friend? How close is that?”

“Guess I’ll find out,” he replied. “Well, we dated for a few months over the summer.

But it was nothing serious.” He took my hands in his. “This isn’t going to change anything between me and you. I promise.”

A few months?

Nothing serious?

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Raising my eyebrows, I shrugged. “Okay.”

We started heading toward the exit of the student center.

Once again, I wanted to believe that what he was saying was true. That this was the point of demarcation for everything we had gone through, that life would be good from here on out. We’d stand up for ourselves against Vivian, and even if we failed, at least we’d have each other. At least we’d have our trust, and nothing could get in the way of that.

But a few months was a long time. And if anyone had Elliot’s trust, was it going to be me, or someone he called his closest friend?

Shaking my head, I squeezed my hand tighter around his.

I didn’t want to make things up, sabotage my own happiness. But at the same time, the last few days taught me that if I wanted something, to hold on to it like it wasn’t my own. Hold on, because they might let go.

I couldn’t let Elliot go. Not now, not ever again.

Vivian wasn’t the only obstacle I had to overcome to keep our love strong.