



Paint Me Dangerous

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Category: Historical Fiction

Description: Lyra Moore thought it would be easy to start over. She had a new school, a broken-down flat, and no one to answer. But being alone in a city that doesn't care is harder than she thought it would be. Lyra is quiet, cautious, and carrying the weight of old wounds. She just wants to blend in.

Until she has to work on a school project with Austin Knight, the boy who is always in the shadows and the subject of whispered rumours, it's cold. Angry. Can't be touched. But there's more to him than just his sharp edges. Something raw, scary, and dangerously attractive.

What starts out as an uneasy partnership turns into a slow-burning crash that brings back parts of Lyra she thought were gone forever. But someone else has seen her too. And unlike Austin, he doesn't want to protect anyone.

Lyra is now stuck between a love that could save her and a threat that could break her. She has to decide how much of herself she wants to get back. And how far she's willing to go down.

In a world full of cruel colours and broken hearts, there is only one truth:

Art can make you feel better.

Love can leave scars.

Some boys don't just paint; they also burn.

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Lyra has a hard time living in a city all by herself because she is a small town girl who is very shy and quiet. Especially when her lack of experience gets her into trouble.

Austin Knight is the school's biggest mystery. Nobody knows what makes him the way he is. Everyone knows to stay away from him.

But when the shy girl catches his eye, no one knows what will happen next.

And Lyra had never thought that the mysterious boy from school could save her.

One thing is certain, though...

Austin's dull life is about to get a lot more colourful.

This is my second time in the city, and everything still feels strange. About a week ago was the first time. The city as a whole will take time to grow on me. The tall buildings, big roads with so many cars, and busy people and noise.

But this time is different from the last; I won't go back.

Lyra, you'll be okay. Be strong.

I look out the window and see cars speeding by. My uncle owns the car I'm in. The boxes next to me, which are full of my things, will be my only friend for now. It's been four hours since I left my uncle's house, and my legs are already cramping. I wish we had taken a break in the middle. I let out a silent sigh.

When I look outside, I can just barely remember the neighbourhood. We are here.

It's one of the city's saddest places. And to be honest, I don't like the place I'm going to live. The apartments look old and, well, sad.

At that moment, it hits me that I'm going to live alone. Since I found out I could finally live alone, I've been so happy, but now I realise what it means.

I'm going to be all by myself.

It might not be that bad; who knows?

My uncle puts the car in the garage. The flat that looked sad last time didn't look as sad. I open the door and get out. I can finally feel my legs again. I stretch my legs and move my toes.

At last.

My uncle and I each have a box. That's all I have, and I'm not complaining—I'm thankful for it. We walk in together, and if that wasn't already weird, the lift ride is.

He doesn't look as cold and rude as he is because he has a bald head and a potbelly. We hardly talk after living with him for ten years. It's been ten years, and I'm still not used to how awkward it is. I don't think I will. Always.

We haven't talked in the last four hours. Would this be what it's like to have a dad?

I let out a sigh of relief when the lift door opens to my floor. We take the boxes to the door.

"Lyra," my uncle says in a rough voice, "stay safe and don't do anything we wouldn't

approve of.” He gives me a credit card and the keys. My parents.

Uncle leaves after a quick nod. There was no smile and no goodbye. I have to do everything myself, so I thought I’d get some help.

I need to stop expecting things from other people.

The door creaks as it opens.

The blinds don’t hang right and the floorboards have come off in some places, but other than that, the place isn’t too bad. The couch isn’t in great shape either. The place is in terrible shape. My eyes are starting to water. I’ve never been alone in my seventeen years of life, and now I’m living in the worst flat ever.

I blink the tears away. Not the right time to cry. I can do this.

I make a mental list of what I need to do. All the dusting and moving things around. There are two bedrooms. I let the other one go and picked the bigger one. The rooms are big, and if they were in good shape, it would be a nice place to live.

The place looks a lot better now, two hours later.

I put on the only clothes I can wear: a pink top tucked into black high-waisted jeans. I put on my old trainers, grab my keys and the last thing my parents gave me: the credit card.

A week ago, my uncle took me on a tour. The mall is an hour’s walk from my flat, but the grocery store and my school are close by.

I choose to take a cab. I have a lot of things to buy. I look at my list. Towels, toiletries, some school clothes, shoes, accessories, and other things you need every

day. I'm going to feel bad about spending so much money. The idea of having to look for work makes my stomach turn.

What have I gotten myself into?

When we get there, I get out of the cab. I take a deep breath and try to get rid of all the bad thoughts before I start shopping.

I can do this.

It's already dark outside when I'm done.

Because I have so many shopping bags in my hands, my arms hurt. I am very angry, to say the least. There are drops of sweat on my forehead. I mumble to myself, "At least this is done," as I make myself walk.

I tell myself that I'm almost home. Almost.

My arms are so numb right now that I know they are going to hurt a lot tomorrow.

I hum a song to myself as I walk home to take my mind off of how I feel.

But I run into someone, and all the bags, including mine, fly away. I fall on my back.

As I stand up, I groan in pain and brush the dust off my jeans. Oh no, did I run into a walking stick or something?

I stop.

A man. If I may add, it's a very scary one. He is a lot bigger than I am. And the fact that he's there is really scary, like he was the one who fell. Even though it's dark

outside, I can feel his intense gaze on me. I just stand there looking stupid because that's who I am.

What a wonderful day.

I finally came to my senses and started picking up the bags. He just watches me pick up all my things. He should have just left if he wasn't going to help. I quickly picked everything up because I didn't like how he was looking at me.

I don't know what to say, so I'm about to walk past him when I hear him speak. "Sorry," he says, still staring at me with a deep, rich voice. I take a deep breath.

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“It’s okay,” I say quickly as I leave. I hate how easily I get nervous. As I walk to my flat, I can feel his eyes burning holes in the back of my head.

When I get home, I flop down on the couch. I smile when I get home. This is a lot better than living with my aunt and uncle. It’s hard, but it’s a lot better than it was before. But something is bothering me.

I made it through today. I feel proud, and I smile to myself.

I just hope school isn’t too bad.

I put the bags in my room. I wash up and put on my pyjamas. I also cook a simple dinner for myself. My heart almost stops when I get back to my room and take off my new clothes.

I look for it here and there, but I can’t find it.

Oh no. No, no, no.

No.

I think I forgot my shopping bag on the pavement. I thought I had picked up everything when I ran into him. I guess I didn’t. I let out a loud groan. It wasn’t just any shopping bag; it was the one that had my new pants in it. My pants.

That’s great.

I hope the guy didn't see it; that would be very embarrassing.

And I really hope I don't run into him if he did look into it. I laugh at what I think. There's no way we'd run into each other in this huge city.

I jump into bed and make myself comfortable. I don't need to worry about this. I welcome sleep when I close my eyes.

As I walk through the hallway full of students, I can hear whispers. I can feel the anxiety settling in because I've never been a social person. A lot of them don't see me, but some do. I can even hear some of the whispers, which don't help my anxiety.

Most of the comments are about how I look, and they are trying to judge me by how I look. Based on how I look. From what they can see in the five minutes they've been with me.

I think to myself, "Well, that's going to be very accurate."

As I walk, I look down and let my long hair cover my face. Nobody likes being judged. It's hard for me to find the reception. I asked some girls before, and they just looked at me with blank stares. I'm not going to ask anyone else.

Before I know it, I run into someone and their papers go flying everywhere and land on the floor.

Not again.

I can see who I bumped into by rubbing the spot on my head where it got hit.

I see a girl who is clearly upset kneeling in front of me, picking up the papers and putting them in order. I choose to help her, unlike the man from yesterday. “I’m sorry,” I say with a small smile of apology after I have gathered all the papers.

“No, no, it’s fine,” she says in a cheerful voice. “Are you new? I haven’t seen you around.” She waits for an answer, and her look isn’t judgemental.

“Yes, today is my first day,” I say with a nervous smile as I play with my fingers. She’s about my height, 5’4”. Her pale face is framed by beautiful red hair that goes all the way down to her waist. She has on a white top and tan trousers that are too big.

“I’m Skye, nice to meet you!” she squeals, and I can’t help but smile at how happy she is. “Do you need help? What’s your name?”

I say, “Lyra.” She frowns at me. I say, “My name.” She whispers “oh” and smiles.

“Can you point me in the direction of the reception?”

“Okay, let’s go.”

Skye is nice; she helps me find the reception. With her red hair, green eyes, and small body, she looks really pretty. She also helps me find out what time my classes are and takes me to my first one. Sadly, we only have calculus and history together.

“Okay, I’ll see you at lunch. Text me,” she says.

I mumble an okay, happy that I won’t be alone.

English Literature is my first class. As I walk into the class, my anxiety grows as I see the students sitting there, all busy with their own things. There are almost enough people in the class. There are two seats next to each other. I can see an empty seat in

the back of the room. I flop down in the chair and see a few people looking at me.

And slowly, almost everyone is looking at me.

The couple who were kissing have stopped and are now looking at me.

I look down at my lap, hoping that everyone will stop looking at me. Is there something wrong with how I look? Is it because I'm new?

I wore a white top, a black skirt, and knee-high boots. I let my blonde hair down and didn't wear much makeup, other than mascara and a light pinkish n**e lipstick. I didn't know how much to wear.

Does that make me look strange?

I then see them looking at the guy next to me.

I can't see the guy's face because he has his head down on the table and is facing the wall. It's very likely that he's sleeping. I ignore the eyes and wait for class to start, hoping he will stay asleep for the rest of the time.

"Should we tell her to sit somewhere else?" I hear a girl say, and then someone else says "no." What's wrong with this chair? Is it the man?

The class goes completely quiet when Mrs. Reeves, the teacher, walks in. She tells me to tell her about myself.

Oh no, I completely forgot about that.

"Uh, hi. I'm Lyra Moore," I say with a nervous smile and sit down. That was a little weird. Can the ground just open up and eat me? I hope I didn't sound as worried as I

was.

The class is very boring. I do my best to keep my eyes open. The man next to me is snoring softly, which doesn't help. His soft snores make me want to sleep too.

Mrs. Reeves makes everyone groan when she says, "You are getting an assignment today." The class is almost over.

My ears perk up. Please don't judge me, but I really like doing my homework. That's what we all really like to do, though. Making a decision.

"You and your partner will be writing a thousand-word essay about anything related to art. The person sitting next to you will be your partner. The assignment is due next week," she says.

Oh God, why did I sit next to this guy? I think about waking him up when everyone else leaves, not just because I need to talk to him about the assignment but also because class is over. I shake him.

"Go away," he says with a groan. His voice is very deep and sleepy.

I shake him once more.

I shake him and say, "Hey, the class is over."

When he turns his head to the other side, my heart skips a beat.

I think I know him. He's the guy I ran into yesterday.

I take a shaky breath to calm down, shake him one last time, and then he finally opens his eyes.

Just to shut them again.

Ugh. I decide to do something because the class is almost empty, and a smile comes to my lips. “Wake up! The class is over!” I yell, and that’s all it takes. I laugh so hard my stomach hurts when he almost falls out of his chair.

I guess I shouldn’t have done that.

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I can see his features clearly now that it's light outside. Jaws and cheekbones that are sharp, hair that is messy. He gives me a cold look that makes me stop laughing. His eyes are brown. I smile at him and mumble a quick "sorry," getting ready to leave now that I've finally woken him up.

As I walk outside to my next class, I can feel holes burning on my head that make me shiver. I'm pretty sure he doesn't remember me as the girl who ran into him yesterday.

I stop in my tracks all of a sudden. Please tell me I didn't forget to tell him about the work.

I groan.

Next, I have history. I won't go back to tell him because I'm running out of time. Skye and I are in the same class, but I can't find her.

I should have told her to wait for me. I try to find the history class by myself. After walking for a few minutes, I'm outside looking for block B. I can see an old building.

I don't think this is where my class is supposed to be. I see two boys when I look around. One of them is smoking.

"Is the little girl lost?" he asks when he sees me looking completely lost.

"Y-yeah. Can you help me out?" I ask them, hoping they will.

I see them looking at each other for a while, and then they smirk. Why would they grin? He throws the cigarette on the ground and steps on it to put out the fire.

“Sure, follow me,” the other one with the piercing says as he grabs my wrist and pulls me inside. I try to get my wrist out of his grip because I don’t like being touched. I give up; his grip is too strong.

“But you don’t even know what class I have,” I say, which makes him walk faster and hold my wrist tighter.

I can hear footsteps behind me; the other guy is following me. My blood runs cold. I try to grab my hand, but he holds my wrist so tightly that I know it will hurt tomorrow.

They lead me to one of the rooms. I scream for help, and then I feel a sharp pain in my right cheek. He hit me. He has both of my wrists in his hands, and the other person just stares at me with cloudy eyes.

I scream for help again, even though I know no one is there. What are they going to do? I shake in his grip, and another sting on my cheek makes my head whip to the side.

“Shut up,” the other guy says with a sneer as he holds my jaw tight.

I don’t remember what happened next. I see someone coming in. Is he a friend of theirs? Or did he come to help me after he heard me scream?

I can see black spots in my vision and the hold on me gets looser. My knees start to shake, and I close my eyes and welcome the dark.

The last thing I see is dark brown, almost black, deadly eyes staring at mine. They

look like people I know.

I have heavy eyelids and am trying to open my eyes. I can't see clearly and I don't know what's going on or where I am. My wrists hurt and my cheek hurts. I see someone in front of me, and I realise I'm sitting against the wall.

I try to figure out who it is. My heart rate goes up again.

I look at the eyes.

Brown.

I now know who it is. Even though I know who it is, I still can't lower my heart rate. What if he is in charge of them? The guys. Everything is falling apart for me. I feel a shiver down my spine and try to breathe.

I can't understand what he's trying to say because he's talking.

He tries to touch my face, but I pull away. After a long time, I see him get up and move away from me. It definitely helps me relax a bit. I can finally breathe normally after a long time. I don't even know when I started crying.

I can hear him say "everything is okay" and mumble something about not knowing how to make someone feel better.

Comfort?

"Who are you guys?" I can finally say it. My throat is dry.

"I'm not one of them," he says through clenched teeth, and his eyes go dark again. I stop looking at his eyes and pay attention to what's around me. I see the same guys

on the floor again. I feel a wave of relief.

“Did you k-kill them?”

“Should’ve,” he says in a low voice. I can tell that I’m getting calmer.

“Thank you,” I say with shaking lips as I look into his brown eyes.

He says darkly, “They’ll wake up in a few hours,” when he sees me looking at them. He sighs and runs his hands through his hair. “Let’s get you to the infirmary.”

“I don’t trust you,” I say to him honestly. What got me here was trust. I’m not going to make the same mistake twice.

“I get it. Call your friends, then.”

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“I’m the worst,” Skye says with a sniff.

I roll my eyes. She’s said it more than twenty times, and I’m not even kidding.

“It’s not your fault,” I say with a sigh. “I should have just called you.”

“No, I should have called you,” she says with a groan. It’s been about an hour since it happened, and I’m feeling much better now. We eat lunch in twenty minutes, and I’m already hungry. I feel better after drinking the fruit juice Skye gave me. We are sitting under a tree in the school field.

“By the way, who beat those jerks?” Skye asks as she sits up straighter.

“I’ll show yo-”

“God,” Skye cuts me off. She stares behind me with wide eyes. When I turn around, I see the brown-eyed man leaning against a tree with a cigarette in his hand and a piercing look on his face.

I turn around.

I shakily say, “He’s the one.”

“No way,” Skye yells in a whisper.

“What?” I say, not understanding why she was so shocked.

“I didn’t know he could do that. We don’t know much about him. He doesn’t have any friends and is always alone. When someone tries to talk to him or anything, he beats the living daylights out of them, and everyone knows not to deal with him. Not even the teachers. His dad has connections, so no one can do anything to him. We just act like he doesn’t exist.”

I can’t believe it. I remember yelling at him to wake up, but he didn’t do anything to me except give me a cold look. He might have let it go because he was tired.

I tell her, “That’s scary.” She just shakes her head.

Interesting.

“What’s his name?”

“Austin.”

Austin

“I’ve been paired with him,” I say. “For my English class.”

Her eyes get as big as tennis balls.

“You what?”

“I sat next to him so-”

“What did you say?”

I sigh and look down at my hands. Why is it so hard to live?

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“God, he’s looking at you again,” Skye whispers. I can see a glint in her eyes. “He likes you!” she says in a way that makes it clear. “That makes sense now!”

I look at her without saying anything. My cheeks get a little warm, and I get a little flustered.

“Maybe he just wanted to help because he heard me scream for help, and maybe he let me sit next to him because he was asleep. Stop jumping to conclusions, Skye,” I say with a sigh.

She just smiles, and the light in her eyes is still there.

The sound of the bell.

“Time for lunch!” she screams. “Let’s go,” she says as she stands up and takes my hand. I grab it and we leave. As we walk inside, I can still feel the same intense eyes on me.

I get a strange feeling in my chest.

.I try to remember Jude, Kira, and Zeke’s names. I don’t feel comfortable with Skye’s friends right now, but I think I’ll get used to them over time.

Kira has dark brown skin, beautiful black eyes, and long, dark hair that she wears in a ponytail. She doesn’t seem interested in anything that’s going on and is busy with her phone.

Zeke has blue eyes and blonde hair. He is a little shorter than us—maybe 5'3?—but he is very big. I don't like how he is looking at me, so I try to stay away from him as much as I can.

Jude is tall and thin. His presence is comforting in a way that Zeke's isn't, and his look doesn't scare me. He is kind and funny, and he makes jokes from time to time.

While we eat lunch, I can't help but think about everything that happened today. I can't wait to get home. I feel a wave of sadness.

I tell them, "I'm going to get some air," and then I stand up to leave.

"I'll be there," Skye says, her voice full of worry.

"No, it's fine. I'll be back in ten," I tell her. She thinks about it. She sighs and says, "Call me if something happens," after a while.

I mumble "okay" and walk to the school field.

I sit on the grass and pull my knees up to my chest. Everything that happened today is flashing in front of my eyes. I feel like I'm about to cry. If I said I didn't miss my old life, I would be lying. I didn't have a lot of freedom, but I did feel safe. At least I didn't feel alone.

"How's your wrist?"

I gasped and put my hand over my heart. My heart is about to jump out of my chest.

I turn around and see Austin standing tall with his hand in his pocket and a blank look on his face. His dark eyes pierced my soul, making him look as scary and intimidating as ever.

“How’s your wrist?”

I stand up and turn to face him, and my heart rate goes up a little. I never noticed that he is at least eight inches taller than me. His hair and eyes are almost the same colour.

Brown chocolate that has melted.

I lick my lips. I don’t answer and make a fool of myself by stuttering; I just show him my wrist. His eyes move from my face to my wrist, and his face stays blank, but I can see that his jaw is tightening. There is a bruise that is now bluish black.

He doesn’t say anything; he just looks at it and studies it without touching it. I choose to speak up. I let my wrist fall.

“Th-thank you,” I say, and my voice sounds squeaky. I groan inside when I hear it. He looks back at my eyes and stays there. “Thanks for helping me,” I say.

What makes his stares so strong? I stop looking at them and look at my feet.

“I mean before,” I say again.

Okay, that’s enough. He gets you.

My cheek is getting hot.

He keeps looking at me, as if he is trying to find something. From a distance, his eyes are very intense, but up close, they are even more so.

He doesn’t say anything; he just nods slightly in response to my thanks. The bell rings, and I don’t know what to say, so I smile tightly at him and then turn around and leave. In the most awkward way possible.

Please kill me now.

When I go back to the canteen, my cheeks are burning with shame. I see Skye and her friends, so I walk over to them. When they see me, her eyes brighten and a look of relief crosses her face.

“Are you feeling better?”

I shake my head. She smiles at me.

.Everyone thought painting nature sounded boring, and they all groaned when Mrs. Moreno said we had to paint something about nature. I didn't think painting nature was boring. I was never bored with painting. I loved painting, whether it was a basket of fruit, a person, or a leaf. But I never could get my feelings across in it.

It's hard for me to choose between a forest and an ocean. I looked around and saw a lot of green, so I chose the ocean. I love paintings that are bright and make me happy.

The world is already hard and sad, so why make it even worse? That's why I didn't like sad endings in films or books either.

I stepped back and looked at my ocean painting when I was done. It was missing something. I don't get it; I gave it my all. It looked happy, but it was missing something, as usual.

I turned around because I thought someone was looking at me. I turn back because I don't see anyone looking at me, but I do see Austin painting at the back of the class.

I suddenly want to see what he was painting.

I sigh and decide to look at more paintings. There are all kinds of landscapes, like

forests, rivers, and fields. Jude also painted a forest, but he doesn't really like it because he starts to look at the trees. I laugh, and he gives me a crooked smile.

The class isn't very neat. Mrs. Moreno is busy with her own things. As long as we get our work done and don't make too much noise, she doesn't care if we move around.

I think about Austin. I really want to see his work. But how? I try to think of something. I look back one more time and see Zeke painting in front of him.

I don't like the way he acts, but he is much easier to talk to than Austin. What should I ask him? Brain, please give me something.

An idea comes to mind.

I walk over to Zeke.

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Austin lifts his head and looks me in the eye at the right time. My stomach feels weird.

Lyra, calm down.

I turn my head away from Austin and look at Zeke instead. When he sees me standing in front of him, he stops painting.

“Hey,” he says slowly, looking me up and down once before focussing on my eyes. I shudder at the way he looks at me and the way he acts.

“I was wondering if I could get Kira’s number,” I say to him. Those brown eyes are looking at me with a piercing gaze, and I surprisingly like it.

I look into his brown eyes, even though I’ve never had the courage. They look empty. Why is he so careful? You can’t really read him. I try to sneak a peek at Austin’s painting while Zeke takes out his phone and scrolls through it.

Whoa.

The painting he made was beautiful. Sad but beautiful. He had painted an ocean too, which was surprising. Mine was calm, but his had angry waves. I couldn’t stop looking at the painting because the feelings of anger and sadness were so strong.

He had only used shades of grey for colours.

When did I start to like paintings that make me sad?

When I look back at Zeke, I hear someone clear their throat and smile. He gives me the phone number.

“Give me yours,” Zeke says, a small smile on his lips. Oh no.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t feel safe giving it to you,” I say, trying to be brave.

Zeke says, “We’re friends,” and his eyes sparkle. I don’t feel good.

I say, “Maybe later,” and that’s it. I say “thank you” and leave, but not before looking at Austin one last time. His face shows that he is amused, but he is still looking at the canvas in front of him. As soon as I look at him, it’s gone.

The day was long and tiring. I put my things in my locker. Skye is telling me about a party we are going to tonight, but I’m really tired from everything that has happened today.

“I think it will help you forget about everything that happened today,” Skye says carefully. I look at her.

“Do you really think so?” I ask with a small sigh.

“Of course. You can hang out with me, meet new people, and maybe even get a date,” Skye says with a wink.

But I don’t want any of the things she said.

“But it’s okay if you don’t want to,” she says with a smile.

“I-” I begin, but Skye stops me. Her eyes are wide and her mouth is open. I turn around and know that my face looks the same as hers.

“I’ll wait for you outside, Lyra,” Skye says, and then she leaves me with Austin. He makes everyone stutter, so I’m not the only one. I close the locker and try to get past him, but he stops me.

“Name,” he says in a rough voice. He is standing tall in front of me and staring into my eyes. His stance is scary, and I feel a chill run down my spine. I feel tingly and happy.

I say, “Huh?” even though I know what he means. I’d like to hear his voice.

He pushes out, “Your name.”

“Lyra,” I say in a soft voice.

He doesn’t say anything. He just shakes his head and walks away with a stern look on his face.

“Stop,” I tell him. He turns around, and his face is as closed off as it always is. I wish I could understand him.

I say, “We have an assignment together,” and I play with my fingers. His eyes are on my face, and I can feel my cheeks getting hot. Why do I feel embarrassed for no reason? I groan inside.

He only tilts his head a little bit.

“Earlier, you were asleep in English class,” I remind him.

“Do it on your own.” He looks at me one last time, then turns around and leaves.

I finally get a hold of myself after a minute or two. When I go outside, I see Skye

standing by the door. When she looks at me, her smile turns into a small, playful smirk.

“I’ve made up my mind to go to the party,” I tell her. I need something to do. Desperately.

And all of a sudden, I’m excited about it.

She screams.

I look at myself in the mirror that goes all the way to the floor.

“Skye, I can’t wear this,” I yell from my room for the umpteenth time. Skye walks into the room and gasps.

“I don’t feel good. I don’t know, it’s not me,” I say to her, looking at her shocked face in the mirror.

She looks at me in the mirror and says, “Nonsense, you look beautiful.” If wearing clothes that show off your body makes you look “beautiful,” then yes, I was looking “beautiful.”

I agree that the dress is pretty, but I’ve never worn anything like it before. It is a bright red colour with a sweetheart neckline that shows off more of my breasts than I would like. The waist is tight, and the skirt flows down to my mid-thigh.

Skye brought this for herself, but she said it would look better on me. I see Skye and know she won’t make me, but maybe I should wear this because I’ve never worn anything like it before.

Not because I want to impress anyone.

“Skye?”

“Yes, babe,” she says as she looks through my wardrobe.

“Will Austin be there?”

She turns away from the wardrobe and looks at me.

“I haven’t seen him at parties, but he might be at this one because the host was his best friend as a kid or something. They don’t talk much anymore, so I don’t know, maybe?”

Skye looks through my closet and says, “I love your n**e dress. I think I’ll wear that.” I’m glad someone will wear the dress; I don’t know why I bought it in the first place. It’s like the one I’m wearing, but it fits all the curves and isn’t as flowy as this red one.

We use Skye’s hair curler to style each other’s hair. She brought a big bag with her that had everything we needed, just so you know. I was a little embarrassed because I didn’t have much. Forget that; I didn’t have anything for tonight. That n**e dress is the only thing.

My hair is curled loosely and goes down to my waist. Skye makes my eyes look smoky, and the colour of my lips matches my dress. I ask her if it’s too much, but she just laughs and says it’s nothing. I feel bad that I’m not helping her much when she does her makeup.

We take our first selfies before we leave once we’re done. I feel like a different person now that I look like one.

“So... you don’t have a flatmate,” Skye says as we sit in her red Porsche.

“Nope.”

“Do you want me to find one? I know the rent is high,” she says as she starts the car. I think about it.

“Sure, but only girls,” I say.

“Understood.”

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I'm happy to have a friend like her. I feel like I've known her for a long time, even though it's only been a day.

As soon as we get out of her car, I start looking for him. Austin. The house is really big, and the music is so loud that I don't want to go inside anymore. Skye grabs my hand and pulls me into the house. Her excitement is contagious.

"Zeke!" Skye screams and wraps her arms around his waist. Do I have to say hello the same way? I'd rather not.

When Zeke pulls away from Skye and looks at me with that strange look, my mind goes blank. Then he surprises me by hugging me and saying my name, which doesn't feel good at all. I pull away when he squeezes me a little.

I don't look him in the eyes and walk away with Skye, who has no idea what's going on. I don't feel well.

We go right to the dance floor and dance for a while until I feel like people are watching me. Eyes I know. I turn around and see Austin, who is alone in a corner with a red cup in his hand. He is wearing black trousers and a white button-up shirt with some buttons at the top left open. I look at him carefully so he doesn't see me looking at him.

Not once does he look at me.

Why do I want him to?

I feel hands grab my waist all of a sudden, and I freak out. I look back and see Zeke. What is wrong with him?

I politely tell him I need a drink, but he just smirks and says he needs one too. I ask Skye if she wants a drink, but she says no again, not knowing how badly I want her to say yes.

As I walk to the kitchen, I try to stay as far away from Zeke as I can, but he doesn't get it because he keeps his hands on the small of my back.

I get a Coke, and he gets some alcohol. What's next? He keeps looking at me, and I can't think of a way to get away.

After a while, I say, "I have to go to the toilet," and his eyes shine with something I can't understand. He runs a hand through his blonde hair and says, "I'll watch your drink." He looks good, but his personality makes him look bad. I know he hasn't done anything wrong, but he makes me feel sick.

I rush to the toilet and take my time. When I get back, I look for Skye but find the blue-eyed devil instead. He gives me my drink, and I sip it while giving him a fake smile.

He begins to ask me about where I used to live. I give him short answers in the hopes that he will get the hint, but he doesn't. I feel dizzy. I hold on to his hands for support. I can't hear anything, and everything goes blurry all of a sudden. I feel like I'm floating on a cloud.

It all gets blurry after that. I can't remember anything.

When I wake up the next day, I have the worst headache. I try to open my eyes, but they just close again. It feels like my head is going to explode. I can't remember anything from last night. I dare to sit down and open my eyes. I know I'm in my room. I feel better, but it doesn't last long.

I gasp and say, "What are you doing here?"

What the hell is Austin doing here?

I feel panic in my chest as I try to remember what happened last night. I can't remember anything at all. How is that possible? I didn't even drink. Austin leans against the window and looks at me, then back outside. He has a small smile on his lips, and my heart is about to burst.

This is the most I've seen him say.

He says, "Good morning to you too," in that deep voice of his. My heart skips a beat.

What happened last night?

When I see that Austin isn't wearing a shirt, my eyes almost pop out of their sockets. I have never seen a body like that before. I look at his face, hoping he didn't see me looking at his body, but the smirk that slowly turns into a small smile says otherwise.

Did he just... smile? I stare at him, confused.

"So... what happened yesterday?" I say in a soft, defeated voice. If something did happen, I can't go back in time.

"Come on, say something," I say. More like plead.

“Did we...?” I ask, suddenly feeling shy. I look at my hands, which are crossed over my lap and under the covers.

“Did we...?” he says, his voice as husky as ever and his smile getting bigger. There are dimples on his left cheek. I get out of the daze.

“You know...” I grit my teeth when he laughs. He waves his hand to say to keep going.

“Did we... sleep together?” I get it out, and I’m pretty sure I look like a tomato. His laughs fill the air, and I can’t believe how much I like it. I didn’t think I’d ever see him smile. It sounds like heaven. He is laughing at me, though.

He laughs and says, “You know, bunny, you’re cute.” My heart skips a beat. Cute? Me?

“K-bunny?”

“You’re like one,” he says and brushes it off.

But what makes it so funny? Maybe he doesn’t feel that way about me. So he might think the idea is funny. That makes my heart beat faster. A little bit.

When I stand up, my headache gets a little better. My dress... I’m not putting them on. I’m in my pyjamas instead. How? Why is Austin at my house? How did he get here? Why can’t I remember anything?

What the hell is going on?

“Tell me what happened,” I say, still sleepy. He stops laughing as he gets closer. I put my hand out to stop him. I don’t want him to get too close and distract me.

“Please?”

He nods his head, and his face gets serious. I wonder if I’ll ever see that side of him again.

“You drank too much.” Too much?

“I’m confused. I didn’t drink at all.”

His serious face turns into a frown. “I found you passed out on a couch at midnight—”

“Midnight? But we got there at 8,” I say. He frowns even more.

He says, “I looked for Skye, and that’s how I got into your flat.”

“Skye told you where I lived? Just like that?” I ask in shock. Why would she do that?

He says, “No, she was here all night. She just left an hour ago.”

“And why are you not wearing a shirt?” I ask, trying not to look down. But a quick look wouldn’t hurt, would it? Don’t look, don’t look—

Oh God. He looks better than the models in these magazines. Can a boy his age really have that kind of body? Wow.

He says, “I don’t see you complaining.” I turn red for the umpteenth time.

Time... Yes.

“What time is it? Are we late for school?”

“No, but we’ll have to skip the library,” he says.

“Why?”

“The assignment,” he says, looking straight at me. Stop going crazy, heart. He is just looking.

“But you—”

“I changed my mind.”

“Can we do it in the evening?” I ask him, hoping he will say yes.

“Of course,” he says. I think he sounds almost excited.

“Your place?” I ask with hope.

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He mumbles a quick “yes.” I nod and get up, leaving Austin shirtless behind as I walk to the toilet. I’m never going to a party again. Not when I have school the other day, at least.

Austin cleans up in my bathroom after me and then decides not to go home because it would take too long. Seeing you at school together makes me feel a little tingly. He doesn’t seem to care. I have no other choice but to walk and get to school late on the second day.

I wear blue jeans and a plain white shirt, and I tie my hair up in a messy bun. It doesn’t feel strange to have Austin in my flat, which is strange. You know what I mean.

But the ride to school is really awkward because we keep looking at each other and then looking away when our eyes meet. The air also gets really thick. I quickly say thank you and walk away after Austin parks the car.

He doesn’t show that he doesn’t talk at all, even though people know him for it. He doesn’t seem like “bad news” either. He has saved me two times.

I meet Skye by the lockers. She hugs me, which surprises me.

“I’m so sorry, Lyra,” she says. “I shouldn’t have left you alone last night.”

I don’t mind that she’s only been my friend for a day. But maybe she should have come with me since it was my first party? But... She stayed there all night.

“It’s not your fault, Skye. Thank you for being there all night; it means a lot,” I tell her. It really means a lot.

“People are spreading stupid rumours about Austin. He was really worried,” she says. I nod along, and when she says he was worried, I get butterflies in my stomach. I get my books out for the first class. Skye and I are taking calculus together.

As we walk to class, she tells me about this girl named “Trixie.” I don’t really pay attention to what she says because I’m thinking about what happened last night, but I know that Trixie is the school slut, not my words, and I need to stay away from her.

The lunch will be here soon. I grab my tray and walk to our table, ignoring the people I know who are looking at me. But before I get to my table, I’m completely soaked. The tray slips out of my hands.

I hear a voice say, “Oops.” I wipe my face with my sleeves while I look at the person who did it. She has strawberry blonde hair that is curled, and even though she has blue eyes and the pinkest lipstick, she looks just like a Barbie. She looks nice.

Also, she doesn’t seem sorry at all.

Everyone is watching us and waiting for the drama to start. Sorry, but no one is getting anything.

“You’re not going to do anything?” the girl asks, putting one hand on her hip. I’m shy, but the Barbie won’t scare me. If I hadn’t been so tired, I might have done something. Like telling her that what she did wasn’t nice.

I give her a little glare and then go to the toilet. Skye comes with me. But even though everyone is shocked, I can see people looking at my shirt. When I get to the hallway, I look down and groan.

Why did I put on a white shirt? And a pink bra on top? Barbie's water makes it see-through, so now my pink bra can be seen through it.

That's great.

I ask Skye, "So, I'm guessing that was the Trixie you were talking about?" as I look at my wet shirt in the mirror.

"No, she's actually one of her friends," Skye says as she gives me a shirt. I groan when I see the piece of cloth. The fact that it's black isn't the problem. It's so small that my stomach will show, and I'm sure it will be a little small for me.

Not to mention how tight it is.

"Lyra, this is the only thing I have," Skye says firmly as she shoves me into one of the cubicles. This or the soaked white shirt. I give it a try.

"I don't feel good; it's just too tight," I mumble.

Skye says with a roll of her eyes and a small smile, "It's not my fault that my boobs are smaller than yours. We don't want you to get sick, so go now."

"You look hot, so stop worrying. Austin will probably drool over you," Skye says in a teasing voice as she looks at me when I'm done.

I choke on my own spit.

"But they say Austin is gay because he hasn't been with a girl," Skye says. What kind of reasoning is that? I start to cough a lot, and Skye pats my back and laughs the whole time.

Oh God, is it really true?

“Let’s eat before the bell rings,” Skye pulls me outside, and I feel a little weird because some guys are looking at me. It’s not hard to get people’s attention, is it? Just show some skin and voila! You have their full attention.

Almost everyone is looking at me when we get back. I follow Skye to the table, silently groaning. I blush when Jude whistles softly. I know he’s not trying to hit on me or anything; he’s been acting like an older brother I never had. It’s a nice whistle.

But Zeke has an evil look in his eyes as he looks at me. I shudder when I look away. Kira isn’t here today.

“Another dumb rumour,” Skye says quietly as she looks behind me. I turn around and see Austin looking at me. He’s three tables away, but his gaze is so intense and piercing that other people notice it too. I turn my head. I see that Jude and Zeke are also looking at Austin, and it seems like they can read each other’s minds. I eat my lunch without talking. That really rhymed.

The day goes by pretty fast. Because of Skye’s tee, six guys have hit on me. Please note my sarcasm. I walk to my locker with a sense of relief that the day is over. Yes! I’m excited to go to Austin’s house.

“Lyra, I almost forgot,” Skye says as she runs up to me.

“I got you a roommate,” she says, taking a deep breath. She didn’t need to run to say this.

“It’s Kira,” she says after she catches her breath. My eyes get bigger.

I cringe when my voice gets high-pitched and I say, “She doesn’t seem to like me.”

Skye rolls her eyes. “She isn’t that bad. Most of the time, there is a reason for how someone is. She’s had a hard past,” she says in a low voice.

If Skye says Kira isn’t bad, I should believe her because she is her friend.

“Okay. When is she coming?” I ask.

“Right now, actually. We can go in my car,” Skye says, and I sigh as she pulls me to her car. I hope she’s not that bad.

Kira is waiting outside when we get to my flat. I smile at her a little, but she doesn’t notice. She’s really rude to me. I show her around, and she looks completely blank.

Austin and Kira would be a great couple.

When I think about it, my heart starts to race and my chest starts to burn. I sigh because I’ve been feeling strange things.

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Why do I hurt myself with my own thoughts?

“When do I move in?” Kira asks as she pops her gum. “Whenever you want to,” I say, and then my phone vibrates in my pocket.

After I check my phone, I gasp. How could I not remember?

You really like making people wait, don’t you?

I get a text from Austin and check the time. Oh no.

“Skye,” I say in a sweet voice as I flutter my eyes. She laughs and asks me what I want.

“Take me to Austin’s house?”

Her eyebrows go up in surprise, and she starts to cough and choke on her spit. I say, “For the assignment,” and Kira looks at me.

“Sure,” Skye says, sounding excited once she has calmed down. They look at each other and give each other a knowing look. I ignore it and go outside with Skye.

It takes us 15 minutes to get there. She texts me that Kira will be moving tonight. Austin lives in a wealthy area. Of course, the school norm is that the mystery boy has to be attractive, wealthy, and sexy. Also, fit. With a fit body. His body. Hey, Lyra!

Skye is amazed by the mansion in front of us. It looks very nice.

Skye says with a dreamy look in her eyes, “You could be living here in ten years, Lyra.” My eyes get bigger.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing,” she says shyly. I roll my eyes and wave goodbye as I get out. I take a deep breath and go inside. I groan when I remember that I still had on the same black blouse and hadn’t changed into something more comfortable. Let’s see if I get hit on for the seventh time, I mumble as I stand in front of the door.

Austin answers the door without a shirt on, with a towel around his shoulders and wet hair. He gives me the same blank look that he always does.

“Hey,” I say, trying not to look at his body. I’m telling you, it’s very hard. Very hard.

The mansion is very quiet. I ask him, “Do you live alone?” He says yes quickly and keeps going. When we get to the door to his room, he turns around and looks at me with something I don’t know.

He opens the door a second later.

I look around. The room smells like him. The colour is off-white, and everything is in its place, which is very different from his personality. He keeps surprising me, doesn’t he?

But my eyes see a small bag on the floor in the corner. A bag from Victoria’s Secret.

I see that the tips of Austin’s ears are turning red. I look at the bag again, and it finally hits me.

The bag I dropped when I ran into him. My eyes get bigger and my cheeks get hot,

turning red.

What is my bag of underwear doing in Austin's room?

I point to the little bag and say, "What is that doing here?"

He scratches the back of his head and says, "I can explain," even though the tips of his ears are still red. He blushes in the ears.

He goes into what I think is a closet. Of course, a mansion like this would have a walk-in closet. He finally comes out, and his black t-shirt fits his muscles perfectly and shows off his arms.

"I didn't know what was in the bag. I tried to call you and even went after you, but you were gone. So I brought it home," he says like it's normal.

"And why would you bring it home?" I ask, my cheeks still hot and I'm pretty sure I look red.

"I thought I would see you again, and I didn't want to leave it on the road."

"Why do you think we'll meet again?" I push.

"Come on, lady. Have some mercy," he says, and his ears get even redder. Who would have thought Austin could be so cute? I stop talking about it. For now.

We get comfortable in his bed while we think about what to write our essay about. For a senior, this is a very simple task. God knows why Mrs. Reeves would pair us up for such a small job.

We haven't gotten anywhere in an hour. I understand now. He probably wants to

teach us how to work together because every idea I come up with isn't good enough for him, and I don't like the ideas he comes up with. We don't get along at all.

That's how an hour goes by. I groan as I get angry. He looks at me with a glare, and I look at him with a smile. He has the guts to look happy.

"We have to pick a topic," I complain.

"Yes."

I promise that I will hit him in the face very hard. I take a deep breath and fight the urge to do it.

"I sigh, "Painting." His eyes start to twinkle, which makes me think this is interesting to him.

"Painting?"

"Yes."

"Colours," he says. Of course, he couldn't agree.

"Okay, colours it is," I say as I check my watch. It doesn't make sense for him to pick the colours for the topic because he only painted with shades of grey last time.

"I have to go now," I say to him. Kira could be moving in at any time.

"Okay. So, tomorrow morning, the library?" he asks. "Okay," I say as we get up and go outside. That's when I remember he has something that belongs to me. He turns around and raises one of his eyebrows when I stop suddenly.

I remind him, “The bag.”

He walks to his room and says, “I’ll get it.” While I wait for him, I feel shy. I look around. It’s strange that he lives alone in a big house. Where are his mum and dad?

When he comes back and gives me the bag, our fingers touch, and I feel a spark. I look at him, and from the look of surprise on his face, I think he feels it too.

He says, “I’ll drive you,” when we’re outside. I start to say no, but he gives me a pointed look.

“We don’t want a repeat of your first day,” he says as he walks to his garage, leaving me in front of the mansion with the Victoria’s Secret bag in my hand.

He drives out in a fancy grey sports car, of course. It smells so good when I go inside.

A bad thought comes to mind. With my new confidence, I think about teasing him a little.

“Seriously, you thought we’d meet, huh?” I say in a soft voice. “Did you look inside the bag too?” I tease a little more, but it backfires on me.

He slowly smiles.

He looks at me for a second before focussing on the road again. “I did,” he says with no expression.

My eyes get bigger.

He says in a low voice that makes my stomach clench, “The white one with little bows on it.” His face stays the same.

“R-really?” I ask.

He hums.

“Can I picture you in them?”

His voice is dangerously low now, and the air around us gets thick. I take a deep breath and try to take my mind off of things by looking outside.

I can see him glancing at me out of the corner of my eye, and I can see the smirk on his face.

“Not at all!”

He laughs.

I look at him when we get to my flat. I take a deep breath, lean in closer, kiss him on the cheek, and mumble a small thank you. He opens his mouth and his eyes get bigger.

Ha!

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I get out of the car, slam the door and don't look at him as I walk into the flat. I can feel his eyes on me the whole time. Like always.

I feel a wave of embarrassment wash over me, and I shudder.

I see Kira waiting outside once I'm inside. I let her in with a sad smile and helped her put her things in order. Kira has a lot more boxes than I do, and it takes us two hours to put everything in order. The flat looks more full and feels more like home.

I cook dinner, and we eat it together. She says she has to go to work at eight. I ask her if she can help me get a job too, and she says she'll do her best. She'll be back before midnight.

I put on my pyjamas and flop into bed, going over the whole day in my head again and again. What a horrible day it was!

Can I picture you in them?

I blush when I think about what he said, and I go to sleep with a smile on my face. He sure is full of surprises, isn't he? As I said. That day was one of the best nights of my life.

If I had known what was going to happen the next day, I would have gone to my aunt's house instead of wasting time sleeping.

I get up much earlier than usual. I feel great and walk to the toilet with a spring in my step. I put on my outfit of the day, which is a n**e top and black high-waisted jeans. I

put my hair up in a ponytail and walk to the kitchen.

I say, “Morning Kira,” when I see her working on something.

“Are you not happy today?” she asks with a small smile. I realise this is the first time she’s been this nice. I smile at her as I see her make pancakes. I sit on the kitchen counter. After breakfast, I send Austin a text to see if he’s still up for going to the library to do the assignment. He sends back a “yes.”

That was quick.

I walk to school in 15 minutes. I walk to the library and sit down at one of the tables. I look for some books that have to do with colours. There is a thick book on one of the top shelves.

But because I’m short, I can’t reach it. I stand on my tiptoes and grumble to myself.

I still can’t get to it.

When I feel someone behind me, I freeze. One hand grabs my waist while the other reaches up to get the book. The smell that I know hits me.

I turn around, and my cheeks get hot. I say “thank you” as I look into his brown eyes. I can smell that earthy smell I like when he’s really close.

When he squeezes my hip a little, I gasp.

A screechy voice makes us jump apart and says, “No romance in the library; I’m sick of hormonal students.” As she walks away, the librarian gives us a look.

I take the book from Austin’s hands, who is laughing, and we walk to the table where

I was sitting. We get through half of the essay before our first class. Time goes by very quickly.

We agree to finish the work at his house in the afternoon and then go our separate ways.

As I walk to my locker, someone suddenly grabs my hand and pulls me into a classroom. I turn around to see Zeke's blue eyes as the door closes behind me.

I can feel my heart racing as I see a smirk on his face. He grabs my wrist and pulls me to a chair.

"Wh-wh-" I can't finish my sentence because Zeke pushes me hard into one of the chairs.

He takes out his phone and tells her to "shut up" in a stern voice. "Don't cry," he says before giving me his phone.

I cry when I see what it is. It's a video of me in the bright red dress. The day of the event. But that's not all. The dress's zip is open.

I let the dress fall and stepped out of it in the video. I only have my black bra and panties on. When I see my hands reach my back, a sob comes out of my mouth. A snap and my bra comes off. I can't look anymore because I'm starting to hyperventilate.

I can't breathe because my tears are making it impossible to see. Zeke puts his hand over my mouth to quiet my cries, and I don't know how long I cry. How did he get me to do those things?

I can tell Zeke is mad because his teeth are clenched and his jaw is tight. He clicks his

tongue. “I told you not to cry, didn’t I?” he says before raising his hand and hitting me. I try to stop crying, but I can’t.

“Listen, honey, no one has to know about this, okay? Or I will make sure every single student has your video. I want you here tomorrow, same time, same place,” he says like he’s talking to a child and not just slapping me.

He pats my cheek, which is red, and leaves.

I miss three classes and spend the time crying in the bathroom. I wouldn’t go to lunch either, but that would make people suspicious, and Skye would definitely ask questions that I couldn’t answer.

I wash my face with cold water and then look in the mirror. My eyes are red and puffy, so anyone with common sense would know I’ve been crying. I go to Google and look up what I can do.

Here’s what you do: Turn on the cold water, put your fingers under the tap, and then gently pat cold water under your eyes, where they are all puffy. This cools you down and tightens the blood vessels under your eyes that are making them swell. Put some cold water on your wrists as well.

I do what it says and wait for a while. I don’t look completely normal, but I’m pretty sure no one will notice. I take a deep breath and leave the bathroom.

Skye asks, “Where were you?” as I walk to the cafeteria queue. I don’t want to eat anything. I quickly come up with an excuse.

“Library. Sorry, I lost track of time.” She looks like she believes me. I don’t want to sit at the same table as Zeke, but I have to. I go to the table with Skye.

“Where’s your tray?” Kira asks.

“I don’t want to eat,” I say with a fake smile. My heart is still racing, and I still feel a little shaky. I can feel Zeke’s eyes on me. While Skye talks about a movie she saw yesterday, I don’t look at him; I look at the table in front of us.

What is he going to do to me tomorrow? That’s all I can think about.

I want to tell Skye everything, but I don’t think she will believe me. She has no idea that Zeke is lying to her. No one can help me get out of this mess.

It seems like the whole day is long. I end up missing all of my classes. At one point, I fall asleep on the bathroom floor, and the caretaker wakes me up. I don’t see the point in staying at school any longer, so I’m thinking about going home.

I run through the hall while I wipe my tears away. But I run into someone, and before I can fall, a hand wraps around my waist and pulls me to a strong chest.

I look at the person who owns the hand with fear, but I feel a little better when I realise it’s not Zeke.

“Watch where you’re going, Lyra. What’s wrong?” Austin says, his scary voice changing to a serious one as he sees me and pulls me to him before I hit the ground. He uses his thumb to wipe away a tear that has fallen down my cheek. His brown eyes fill with worry, and a frown spreads across his face as he looks at me.

I want to tell him everything.

But I can’t take the chance.

By the way, he’s still a bit of a stranger. You all need to stop being mean to her

because she wouldn't tell Austin everything.

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His eyes that are full of questions never leave my face. I look around because I'm afraid Zeke might see us. When there is no one else around, I feel better. I try to get away from Austin, but he won't let me because he has a tight grip on my waist.

One of his hands leaves my waist to touch my left cheek. The feeling makes my eyes flutter shut.

His voice is hard, but his look at me is soft. I might have gotten a little bruise on my cheeks after the slap. I wish I could, but I know I can't. I can't even think of a lie.

"Please drop it," I say softly. I beg with my eyes, and his gaze softens. He looks like he can't decide whether to drop it or not. That makes my heart race. Does he care? Maybe a little bit.

"Please?" I say quietly. He shuts his eyes and then opens them again, nodding his head once.

He says, "Just this once," in a low voice that makes it sound like he doesn't want to. I feel like crying because I know there will be another time. When he lets go of my waist, I try to get past him, but he grabs my hand and raises his eyebrows.

"What?"

"Don't you have class?" he asks. I look down at my feet.

"Let me go, Austin."

I'm about to cry, and I don't want to break down in front of him. He lets go of my hand and sighs tiredly, but he follows me instead.

I say firmly, with tears in my eyes, "Austin, go to your class." He doesn't listen. I start walking home without paying attention to him, my head full of what could happen next. Austin follows me to my flat and all the way to my room, but he acts like he doesn't know me.

When I get to my door, I look at him tiredly.

"What do you want?"

He rolls his eyes and pushes past me to my flat, leaving my mouth open. He sits on the couch and pats the space next to him. I close the door behind me and stand next to him, not sure what to do.

With my hand on my waist, I say, "You're creeping me out, Austin."

"I had nothing else to do, so I thought I should keep my poor bunny company," he says with a blank smile. I give him a dirty look.

He still sounds angry.

I look angrier.

"Okay, I just wanted to make sure you were safe," he says with a sigh.

"Why do you care?" I ask in a soft voice. But I'm not complaining. I just want to know.

"Lyra, you are way too innocent for this world."

I feel fuzzy on the inside.

I sit next to him and think about telling him everything, but I'm too scared to do it. If Zeke leaks the video, I'm in big trouble. My stomach is grumbling.

I know, I hadn't eaten anything. When Austin looks at me sternly, my cheeks turn red.

"Don't tell me you didn't eat lunch," he says with a sigh. I smile sheepishly at him, and he shakes his head and mumbles something I can't hear. He takes my hand and pulls me out of my flat. I don't ask him any questions and let him take me where we're going.

I don't want to say anything because I'm too tired.

When he doesn't let go of my hand and holds it tightly, my stomach feels funny. I feel warmth all over. Do friends hold hands? Am I supposed to feel like this?

We end up at a restaurant where he buys me food. He won't listen to me when I tell him not to. I love spending time with Austin, but I can't stop thinking about the next day. Austin must have noticed this because he keeps staring at me, trying to figure out what was going on.

We go back to my flat after eating at the restaurant to finish the assignment. We end up seeing a movie instead. We're almost done, and it's evening.

I get up from my bed and walk to the door. "So, we're going to the library to edit the essay tomorrow, right?" He hums softly and looks for something in my face.

I lean against the door and ask him, "What's wrong?"

Austin stands up from my bed and walks over to me. “What’s going on, Lyra?” he asks.

“Tell me,” he begs, and my heart starts to race. I hold his hands and try to sound calm.

“It’s fine, okay? You said you would drop it.”

“Okay.”

He leaves the room and the flat without looking back. I smile sadly. How did my life end up like this?

Why do good people have bad things happen to them?

Or am I not a good person?

The next day, I throw up everything I ate for dinner. I’m pretty sure I have a fever. No matter what, I put on a light pink shirt and black jeans. I don’t eat breakfast and walk to school. I’m glad Kira doesn’t ask me anything. I feel dizzy and like my whole body is about to shut down, but I can’t skip school. I don’t want to take any chances.

Risks that have to do with the video.

I would do what Zeke said and go today.

Should I tell the police? What if Zeke finds out?

I met Austin at the library. He looks at me with worry in his eyes, which is the most emotion he has ever shown me. I smile at him even though I’m tired, hoping he’ll see that I’m okay. Even if I’m not. I can’t focus on the assignment, and Austin definitely

sees it, but for some reason he doesn't say anything. Time flies by, and I feel dread.

My heart starts to race a lot as I leave Austin and head to the classroom where Zeke is waiting. I feel like throwing up again, even though my stomach is empty, and my pace slows down.

I check to see if anyone is around before I open the door. I take a deep breath and open the door.

When I see Zeke playing with a knife, my heart drops. I take another deep breath and go into the class, closing the door behind me.

This school makes me mad.

I try to stop shaking like an earthquake, but I can't. His pocket knife makes me shiver all over. Zeke doesn't look at me and keeps playing with the knife.

He pats his lap after a moment, and I know what he wants. I put my bag on the table next to me and walk slowly towards him. My heart is going to jump out of my chest.

I often think about the worst things. I know it's a bad habit. So, all I can think is that it will hurt to die if he kills me with the little knife.

Finally, he looks at me when I'm halfway there. His laugh echoes through the empty classroom.

He says in a threatening voice, "I'm not going to kill you, Lyra. Not yet."

Not yet.

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I know I have to go to him no matter how long it takes. I don't want to make him angry, though. I walk over to him and sit on his lap. The feeling makes me feel sick to my stomach. He moves me around and then looks at me with half-closed eyes.

He reaches for something else while keeping the knife on his desk. It's a piece of rope. His other hand runs down my arm, and I shiver in disgust.

He grabs both of my wrists and ties them behind my back, which hurts. They're going to get bruises, and I don't know how to hide them. I wait for him to do something next.

He traced my neckline a few times, and I squirmed in his lap. It makes me feel so bad. Everything he does is hurting me. When he pops the first button on my shirt, I take a deep breath.

A tear falls down my face and lands on my shirt. He looks up with fake pity and unbuttons more.

No matter how hard I try, more tears keep falling. The next thirty minutes go by very slowly, and I cry and whimper the whole time.

I wear some bracelets to hide the bruises on my wrists. Thank goodness I had some of them in my bag. It doesn't cover them all the way, but it does a pretty good job.

I think about skipping class again, but I need good grades. I miss the first class because I'm in the bathroom cleaning my bloody shirt, which was starting to look even pinker. I put on a black shirt. I can't help but cry as I clean the blood off the

shirt and think about what happened with Zeke.

I don't care about the classes; I'm going home.

This time, though, I don't run into anyone when I walk outside the school. I let the tear fall as I walked home, not caring who saw me.

I fall apart as soon as I walk in the door. I go into my room, close the door, and cry so hard that my throat hurts. At some point, I doze off.

A bell wakes me up. I closed my eyes again and hoped that sleep would come back, but the ring kept going. I sit on my bed and rub my eyes while I look at my phone.

When I see who it is, all signs of sleep leave my eyes.

Call coming in

Austin

I don't want to pick up the phone, and I feel better when the call ends. I feel better for a short time, but then he calls again. I take a deep breath and pick up.

"Hey," my voice sounds hoarse and sleepy because I've been crying so much.

"Where the hell are you?" He says it in a harsh way that makes me flinch. I check the time and see that it was lunch.

"I'm sorry," he groans and then says in a softer voice, "Where are you?"

I croak out, "Home."

“Why?”

“Because,” I don’t say anything else because I don’t know what to say. He sighs on the other side and says something I can hear.

I ask him, “What?”

“You’ll kill me, Lyra.”

“You have to come over again,” he says. “We have to finish the assignment.” But I know it’s about more than just the assignment. It sounds more like an interrogation.

“Okay,” I say to him.

“Eat something,” he says before hanging up. I roll my eyes and lie down on my bed. I fall asleep again.

I am late because I walked to Austin’s house after answering Skye’s call. I am almost running to his house. I’m really hungry because I slept too long. I’m just tired and hungry now. Not to mention, feeling terrible.

As I try to catch my breath, I knock on his door. The door opens to show Austin. His face doesn’t show much, but his eyes look worried. I wonder what it is?

Before I speak, my stomach growls loudly. I know I’m turning red because I can feel my face getting hotter.

“Seriously?” he says as he pinches the bridge of his nose.

He lets out a big sigh and holds my cheeks, which makes my eyes widen and my cheeks get even hotter. He talks to me like I’m a little kid.

“Hey, you need to take care of yourself, okay? Not eating meals is bad for your health. I want to help you, but I might not always be there.”

That makes my heart feel good. I nod my head when he takes his hand away and looks at me with a strange look. One that I’ve never seen on him before.

He says, “Let’s get your tummy something,” and I laugh as I walk into his house. He turns around and bumps my arm with his as he locks the door behind us.

I wince and jump away from him, which makes him squint his eyes. As he walks towards me, my heart rate goes up. His face is very serious.

When he gets close enough, his index finger runs along my jawline and up, giving him a good look at my neck.

I don’t know why I don’t stop him from pulling the shirt off my shoulder and showing the cuts.

“What the hell is this, Lyra?” he yells.

I turn my head away.

I try to eat the spaghetti without making any noise. Austin can really cook. I hold back moans of pleasure as I eat it.

It’s strange, but I’m not worried that he’ll ask me about what he saw. Not like I’m going to tell him.

The quiet is making me nervous, and I can tell Austin is holding back from asking me questions. He is sitting across from me at the big dining table we are sitting at, with his elbows on the table and his hands covering his face.

I laugh inside when he looks serious. I shouldn't be thinking about him that way because I'm sure he doesn't think of me that way. He takes his hand off his face and walks over to me when I'm done eating.

He doesn't look at me at all, and I think it's because he saw the new scars. He might be disgusted by them, and who wouldn't be? He takes my plate and puts it in the washbasin. He walks out of his kitchen without saying anything or even looking at me, and I take that as my cue to follow him.

He doesn't even look back at me when we get to his room. I silently stare at his back, my mind racing with thoughts.

But I know one thing for sure: I'm not telling him the truth.

Austin says, "I'll make you tell the truth, Lyra," after a thousand years. My heart rate goes up and my eyes get bigger. What he says shocks me not only because I was thinking the same thing, but also because he sounds so sure.

He turns around, and his eyes are full of determination. When he looks at me, it's like he's looking right through me. He walks up to me, and I take a few steps back. My back hits the wall.

This clichè position isn't as hot as the romance books say it is. This makes me feel scared, anxious, and worried. And more worried.

His breath blows on my face, and his sharp eyes look down at my neck. I try to push him away, but he won't move. He puts his hands behind my ear and then drops them to my shoulder. He takes off the shirt, showing my scarred skin.

"Stop, Austin," I say through my shaking lips, but he keeps looking at my skin, and every second his eyes fill with rage.

I whimper, “Austin.” That makes him stop. He steps back and wipes the tears off my cheeks. He looks more worried than I do. His face is strikingly frowning, and his eyes are looking at me with worry. His jaw hurts because it is clenched.

I don't think twice about wrapping my arms around his waist and putting my head on his chest. As I cry against his chest, my sobs get louder and my body shakes a lot. I know that crying won't help me, but it does make me feel better.

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For me, crying is a form of therapy.

A moment later, he wraps his hands around my waist and pulls me closer. One of his hands runs up and down my back, calming me.

He whispers softly in my ear, “I’m here,” and kisses my hair. I pull away from him, and my tears fall less often. I look at him and his shirt, which is completely soaked, and feel bad for him.

Austin takes my hand and leads me to his bed, then goes into the bathroom. He comes back without a shirt on and with a first aid kit in his hand. The best thing anyone could do to get their mind off things is to see Austin without a shirt.

I didn’t just say it.

“Who did it?” he asks, his voice rough and hard, as if he were talking about the cuts.

“Drop it, Austin,” he says, cutting me off.

“Don’t you tell me to ‘drop it’ again, Lyra. Have you seen the cuts? Do you really not care about your body? Why would you do this to yourself? I would have helped you if you had just told me what was going on.”

“Please don’t try to get me out of this. I can’t take the chance,” I say, and my voice breaks. His eyes soften a little.

He looks at my wrists. As he looks at them with suspicion, his soft look changes. I

really hope he doesn't see it.

Austin takes off the bracelet and lifts my hand. When he sees the bruise, he takes a deep breath. He does the same thing to my other hand, which also has a pretty big bruise.

He takes a deep breath to calm down.

"You should clean the cuts," he says, and you can hear the anger in his voice when he says "cuts." No, I shake my head. I haven't looked at the new scars yet, and I don't want to.

I can't stand to look at them.

Austin gives me a stern look. I stand my ground and shake my head no again. He sighs in frustration and runs a hand through his hair.

"Bunny, they can get sick," he tries to explain. I don't care. Physical pain will numb my emotional pain, if anything.

"Lyra."

"Austin," I say in the same way.

"Why not?" he asks in a frustrated tone.

"Don't want to look at them," I mumble. His eyebrows go up.

He asks, "Do you want me to do it for you?" I look at him in surprise. What?

"Please, just get them cleaned," he says, his ears turning a light pink colour. "I mean,

if you trust me, I won't look down."

I let out a sigh.

"Are you sure they won't make you sick? They're ugly."

"What?"

"Um..."

"No, bunny. They won't make me sick."

"Okay, but only after you put on a shirt or something," I say softly, my cheeks getting hot. He laughs a little, then goes to his closet and comes back with a black shirt. Is there anything he has that isn't grey?

When Austin says the next thing, I get a chill down my spine.

He says, "Let's get you out of that shirt, bunny."

I take a deep breath and start to unbutton my shirt.

When he looks at me, I get butterflies in my stomach. My shirt is unbuttoned and hanging loosely on my arms, showing off my navy bra.

He sits in front of me, dips a piece of cotton in alcohol, and lightly holds the side of my neck to keep me still. When the cotton touches the cuts, I wince. His eyes move to mine and stay there for a while before moving back to my shoulders.

"Ow," I say again. He sighs as he looks at me again.

Does he look worried?

He says in a low voice, “If cleaning hurts you this much, God knows what you went through to get these in the first place.” Voice that scares me.

“Please tell me,” he says, looking me in the eye.

“No,” I say. I want to tell him so he can beat Zeke’s a*s, but I can’t take the chance.

He asks, “Is there something I can do?” and I look at the first aid box without saying anything. I don’t believe so.

He sighs and goes back to cleaning, which makes me wince over and over again and makes him look at me with concern over and over again. He puts some medicine on the cuts after he cleans them. I don’t look down because I’m afraid I’ll break down again.

“My voice is so weak,” I say in a whisper.

Austin says, rolling her eyes, “That’s coming from someone with more than a hundred fresh cuts on her skin.”

“More than a hundred?” I laugh and cry at the same time.

“Yeah, you’re anything but weak,” he says. I smile at him a little. We can understand each other without saying anything. Like he knows what I’m going through.

Maybe... He might be able to help me out. Zeke wouldn’t know that I told Austin, would he? But what if he did? What if he knows and sends the video to everyone at school?

Austin asks, “What’s going on in that pretty head of yours, bunny?” as he sits next to me. I see that the first aid kit is missing.

“Bunny sounds cringe, Austin,” I say with a laugh.

“Whatever, bunny.”

“I want to tell you, you know Austin? I do,” I say as I lean against the headboard of his bed.

He pulls me to him by my stomach and says, “I know.” His hands lightly touch my stomach skin. The little touch makes me shiver. I lean against his chest and let him mess with my hair. It feels strangely calming and soothing. I close my eyes and enjoy the warmth.

I hear soft snores after a while. I sit up straight, take his hand off my stomach, and look behind me to see that Austin is sleeping soundly.

His black hair is messy, which makes it look even better, and his lips are slightly open. I find him strangely interesting, but I don’t know anything about him. Skye said that the school doesn’t know anything either.

Even when he sleeps, I smile a little when he frowns. I cover him up and stand up with a soft sigh. I stretch a little after buttoning my shirt and then write him a note.

Same time tomorrow at the library. Thank you for everything, Austin.

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I can even make a cute smiley face.

I look at him again and feel good inside. What is going on with me? I shake my head and walk out of his room. Why do bad times last longer than good ones?

I walk home, doing my best not to think about tomorrow. There were only cuts today. Who knows what will happen tomorrow?

Kira is lying on her couch when I get home. She is sleeping. I go to her room and get her a blanket, then I cover her with it. Then, just as I'm about to go to my room, I see Kira's cheeks. There are some tears that have dried. I let out a sigh.

Isn't it true that everyone is fighting their own battle?

When I wake up the next morning, I have a small headache. I get ready and put on a baby blue blouse and black jeans. I don't care anymore, so I don't wear makeup and let my hair down.

I don't even eat breakfast because I know that after my session with Zeke, I'm most likely to throw up everything. I have to try not to miss class today, though.

I wait for Austin at the library for a while, but he never shows up. I end up doing all the editing for the assignment myself. He might not have seen the note I left.

I send Austin a text asking where he is, but he doesn't answer. I'm worried because that's not like him. I hate that this person has this effect on me. Someone I haven't known for long.

I walk to class like I always do, and Zeke is there waiting for me. As I open the door, my heart beats in an irregular way, as it always does. Zeke's eyes move to me, and they light up right away. He looks at me in a different way. His blank face turns into an evil grin that makes my blood run cold.

“Lyra, come in.”

I take a shaky breath and walk into the class, shutting the door behind me.

Zeke leaves an hour later, completely happy with me. He... He touched me there. I finally leave the room in tears after a long time. I would usually put things together before leaving that classroom, but I can't do that now.

I leave the class and go outside. When I see the figure leaning against the door, I can't breathe. Angry brown eyes stare at me.

Austin stands up straight, and his anger grows with each passing second. He has his hands in fists at his sides and his jaw is hurting. He looks at my face.

My blood turns cold. Austin knows.

Finally, phew.

Austin knows.

Austin knows.

“Did... Did J-Zeke see you?” I manage to say, even though I'm scared to death.

He doesn't answer, which makes my heart race even faster. I start to shake. His eyes are still full of rage. Did Zeke meet Austin? He will send the video to the whole

school if he does. What if he already has?

My vision is blurry and my whole body feels numb.

“No.” His voice is harsh and sounds forced.

“No?” My voice is breathy.

“Not at all.”

I can finally take a deep breath. My heart rate slows down a little, but another thought comes to mind. Austin might not have seen Zeke, but Zeke did see me. Austin saw Zeke do... things to me.

I take some steps back without meaning to. I have to leave. This is making me feel trapped. Then I turn around and walk quickly to my first class instead of the toilet for once. I don't like having to deal with problems. Especially these kinds. As I walk away, I can feel his piercing eyes on me.

Austin is in all of my first three classes, which is too bad. It doesn't help at all to feel his eyes on me. I can't focus all the time. But I'm glad I can stay away from him. I sit in the front of all my classes and leave early, which makes it hard for him to talk to me.

It takes a long time for lunch to get here. I look for Skye again to avoid him. We walk to the cafeteria with her arm around mine. But a very familiar muscular chest in a black shirt is blocking our way.

“I need to talk to you, Lyra,” Austin says in a way that makes me shiver. I can feel Skye getting stiff too.

“I don’t.”

“I didn’t ask.”

“Okay, but she is coming with me,” I say. Skye tries to pull her hand away, but I won’t let her. She won’t leave me alone. Not again.

“It’s about the assignment; we don’t want to bore your friend over there,” he says through gritted teeth. I see that his jaw is tight. A lot of people are looking at us, which makes me even more nervous.

“Go ahead and talk, Lyra,” Skye says in a high-pitched voice and walks away. Leaving me behind.

Again.

Not aware.

Austin grabs my wrist and pulls me out of the school. The people around us move out of the way like in the movies. We go outside and walk towards the old buildings.

I don’t stop him because I know I can’t. He is determined to find out.

He stops right where I got lost on my first day. Where I got stuck in a situation that was kind of like this. I am full of anxiety. I haven’t even been in trouble for a week, and I’ve already gotten into more trouble than I could have imagined.

There is no one here. The old building makes me feel uneasy, and the air is completely still. I feel sick to my stomach. I’m happy I didn’t eat anything. Austin is next to me. I don’t look at his face because I’m afraid to look into his eyes.

He saw Zeke doing... things to me. He saw that I was crying. He saw me fall apart. A thought comes to mind. He didn't come in today. He didn't save me this time.

"I can help you, Lyra," Austin says, and his voice has a tone I can't place. I don't know what it is, but it sounds strangely honest. He breathes heavily and hits the wall behind him.

It's strange that I'm not crying. No, not even one tear.

Austin looks at me softly, the kind of look that could melt me from the inside, but right now it doesn't bother me. He used to make me feel better, but now I feel cold inside. Why didn't he help me?

"Why didn't you save me?" I ask, my voice breaking. When he puts his hand on my arm, I shake it off. I understand that it wasn't his "duty" to save me. He can do whatever he wants. But he was there from the start. Was that just a performance?

"Because I thought the bastard was blackmailing you. I mean, it took all my strength not to strangle him to death, Lyra. I don't know what he has against you."

Oh.

I step back a bit. I have to go to class. Austin is messing with my head, and no one can help me get out of this mess. And I can't afford to miss class. I was never the type of student who missed class. I don't look at him and then turn around. I walk towards my class.

Skye must be looking for me.

My arm suddenly turns me around. I look him in the eyes.

“Why do you care, Austin? Just tell me. Why?”

“Why? I don’t know. I just do, okay? Seeing you like this is killing me,” he yells. His voice makes me flinch, which is the opposite of what he said. When I flinch, his eyes get softer. He says something quietly and then closes his eyes.

“Please,” he begs. I look at his face, not sure what to do. His hair is messed up and ruffled, which is different from other times. His face is very striking, but his eyes look tired and he has a frown on his face. I wonder if I am the cause of his behaviour.

Most likely not.

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“It’s a video,” I say in a soft voice. He gets closer, and I can see that he is getting more worried.

“On the night of the party,” I say, looking away. He wraps his arms around my shaking body and holds me. He holds me close to his chest and gently runs his hand up and down my back.

“I—In the video... I’m naked, Austin,” I say, and a sob comes out. Even I can tell that my voice sounds broken. Austin gets stiff. He keeps running his hand up and down my back. But I only feel coldness spreading through me.

“I am naked in the video,” I say again and again against his chest, my silent tears soaking his shirt. He pulls me in deeper. I wish I could stay like this for the rest of my life.

When he talks, I cringe at his tone. It sounds scarier than anything else. It is a whisper, a dark promise, and a chilling whisper.

“I’m going to kill him.”

I’ve never been so excited to see someone die.

I look out the window and try to feel better by looking at the pretty flowers in the garden, which are orange, yellow, pink, and all the other colours. They have butterflies around them that admire how beautiful they are. But the flowers will die and fade away.

And the butterflies will find other flowers to enjoy, ones that are young and pretty. Then butterflies will also die.

I hear “Pst.” My eyes go straight to the front. Mr. Richard is busy talking about some dumb theory about how life evolved that makes no sense at all.

Again, I hear “Pst.” I turn to my left.

“Hey,” a man whispers. I didn’t even notice that he was sitting next to me. The class is almost over.

This guy has a grin on his face that makes him look like a boy. He looks good with green eyes and brown hair that falls on his forehead. Why does every guy at this school look good?

He says, “I am Eric.”

I say, “Lyra.” I look away from the outside again. My eyes fell on the yellow flower that has little white spots on it. It looks great. But it will die at some point.

Everything does.

Death.

I’m going crazy.

Eric whispers again, “What’s wrong?” I know he’s trying to be nice, but it’s a little annoying.

“Nothing,” I say with a tight-lipped smile. When the bell rings, I let out a sigh of relief because class is finally over. I smile at Eric one last time and then run outside.

I think back to what happened at lunch. I'm scared of what Austin will think of me, so I wish I hadn't told him anything. I know I shouldn't care what other people think of me, but I do. I can't do anything about it. Or maybe I could control it; I just haven't tried very hard.

My phone vibrates in my pocket just as I'm about to go to the next class. I take it out. A message from Austin makes my heart race.

Come to your locker to meet me.

I put the phone back in my pocket and look around the classroom one last time. I turn around and walk to my locker with a sigh. Austin is standing next to my locker with one hand on his pocket and a serious look on his face that sends chills down my spine. I might think it's hot if I weren't so nervous.

I'm going nuts.

"Hey," I say softly. He looks into my eyes and tries to find something in my face. After a while, he finds my hand. He takes my hand and leads me to the classroom I know very well.

The same classroom where Zeke and I met every morning.

His hands are warm, but mine are cold and sweaty. He doesn't seem to care because he holds them firmly but gently. The kind of hold that makes your stomach hurt and your heart race.

Austin unlocks the door. He looks at me once before opening the door wide enough for me to go in. I freeze when I see what's in front of me.

Austin shoves me inside and shuts the door next to me. I think my mouth is open and

my eyes are wide.

“Do you like it?” I hear Austin say from behind me. I shut my mouth.

Zeke is in front of me. He is tied to a chair. His face is bloody and the skin around his eyes is black. His lips are cut, and blood is running down his face. The front of his shirt is ripped. I see a man standing behind Zeke. I think I’ve seen him before. He is even bigger than Austin.

I turn back to Austin to ask him to explain something.

He smiles at me.

“Do you like it?” he asks again.

“Does the other guy know?”

“He doesn’t know anything.”

I look at Zeke again. Zeke looks back at me, and his sad eyes scream defeat.

“You want to hurt him more, bunny? Maybe a punch or two? Or ten? Or thirteen?” Austin smiles wide, showing his teeth. I turn around and look at Zeke. He looks like he’s going to die and he’s covered in blood.

“No, Austin,” I say with a shaky smile. “What now?” I finally find my voice.

“Don’t worry, baby. We’ll take care of him. No one will know. He’ll probably go to jail.”

“That video?” I whisper. Austin points to the ground. I stare in shock at the phone

that is completely broken. Austin smiles at me, and even though it's not often that I see him smile, he really does look happy.

“Are there c-copies?”

“No, Andrew, they tortured the hell out of him; he didn't make one. Who doesn't make a copy? I'm so f*****g glad that he's dumb.” I sigh in relief.

Austin points to something and the other guy nods. He takes my hand and we go outside with that. When we get outside, I look at Austin. I feel like a free bird and my happy tears make it hard to see.

I say “Thank you” with lips that are shaking. Austin smiles again and wipes a tear from my cheek. I admire him. I really don't know what I would do without him.

When I wrap my arms around his waist and hug him, he is surprised. I feel great. I'm about to leave when he wraps his arms around me and pulls me to him. When he kisses my hair, it makes my stomach feel like it has butterflies in it. We stayed like that, not caring that people were watching us.

“Lyra?” I hear a voice that surprises me and makes us jump apart. My cheeks get hot.

Eric looks at me and says, “We keep running into each other, don't we?” I give him a little smile. I can feel Austin behind me, and I don't like how close he is. I can almost feel him on me.

Austin says in a cold voice, “Who the f*k is this?” I see Eric swallow.

“Uh... hi. I'm Eric,” Eric says in a scared voice. Poor guy. I move away from Austin.

“Are you her boyfriend or something?” Eric pushes, still sounding scared. My cheeks

get hot and my eyes get big.

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“Uh, no. Austin is just a friend,” I say quickly, looking at Austin nervously. His eyes are hard, and he looks like he wants to kill you.

He looks at the two of us, then glares at Eric and walks away. I smile at Eric and then follow Austin, who is angry.

What’s wrong with him?

Austin stares at the grass, his face full of rage. What makes him so mad? I mean, he looked fine a few minutes ago. We’ve been in the shade for a while now. He sat down outside and held my hand, bringing me down with him.

There is an awkward silence around us. I can also feel his anger.

We were sitting very close together, with our thighs touching. He didn’t seem as affected as I was, maybe because he was so angry with Eric. Or maybe he just doesn’t think of me that way. So, what did the guy even do to him?

I break the awkward silence by asking, “Do you know him?”

He grunts, “No.”

“Did he do something wrong?” I ask again. He pinches the bridge of his nose and lets out a sigh.

“No, bunny,” he says through gritted teeth.

Then what the hell is wrong with him?

I think about going back to school. I have some free time, so I might go to the library. I see Austin's fists as I get ready to stand up. I gasp.

They look like they have blood on them. They're literally covered in dried blood. I see him looking at me, so I look up. This makes me think of the first day I was here. It's strange that the same thing happened twice in a week.

He had a bloody fist. We are sitting next to each other in the same spot. I let out a sigh.

"You should clean your fist," I say.

I notice that his lips are moving a little. He shakes his head "no." I knew it. I sigh again and stand up, holding out my hand for him to grab.

He raises his eyebrows at me but still takes my hand and stands up. As we walk inside, his big hands feel warm in mine. Who would have thought that his hands could make me feel this way? My heart was about to burst out of my chest.

What do you think his lips could do?

Lyra, you are bad!

I shake my head to get rid of the thought, and my cheeks get a little hot. We get to the hospital. Austin gives me a look that says, "Really?" I roll my eyes and take him inside.

But to my surprise, the infirmary is empty. "Where is the nurse?" I ask. Austin shrugs.

I look for alcohol and bandages. I think I'm going to be a nurse. I laugh at the idea in my head. When I smile at him, he stops frowning and his face softens. I put the cotton in the alcohol and then dip it.

I say, "This might hurt a little, okay?" and bite my lips a little. He looks at my lips and then into my eyes. The air suddenly gets hot and thick, making it hard to breathe.

I start to clean the blood off his fist, even though my heart is racing.

He surprises me by not even flinching or making a sound. I look up because I know he is looking at me. His eyes go back to my lips, and I remember that I'm biting them again. I swear my heart skips a beat when he pulls my bottom lip away from my teeth with his other hand. His eyes get darker.

I clean his hand again and wrap it up in a bandage, all the while feeling his strong gaze on me. I hum quietly because I'm happy with what I've done. When I throw away the cotton and put the things back, my hands shake a little.

I break the silence by saying, "All done." My voice sounds a little breathy. He follows me when I go outside.

When his bandaged hand grabs my wrist and turns me around, I am shocked. He takes a step towards me, and without thinking, I take a few steps back until my back hits the wall. He smiles a little when he puts his hand next to my head and traps me.

His eyes go back to my lips. I also look at his full, pink lips and think about how it would feel to kiss them. When he looks at me, my cheeks get a little warm.

When he looks at me, I feel like I'm the most fragile thing in the world. One of his bandaged hands holds my cheek, and I'm surprised that someone like him can be so gentle.

He takes his hand away from my head and wraps it around my waist, lifting me a little. When his tongue slips out and runs over his lips, I can feel his breath on my lips and my stomach tightens. I do the same thing he does, and his eyes get even bigger.

Was this going on? Please God, don't let this be a dream!

Then he bows his head. When his lips touch mine, I hold my breath. We stay like that for a while, and then he sucks on my bottom lip, which makes me moan in a breathy way. I put my hands around his neck and try to do the same, sucking on his upper lip.

He moans, and I pull back.

I mumble, "Did I do it wrong?" I didn't know what I did wrong because it was my first kiss. Why did he make that noise?

"First kiss?" he asks, surprised. I look at my hands, and my cheeks get even hotter. He laughs a little before kissing me again.

This time, he kisses my lips with hunger, and I moan into his lips. When his tongue touches mine, I jump a little. When I pull on his hair, he groans into my mouth again.

We pull apart after a long time and breathe heavily. His lips look swollen, and I'm so happy that I did it to him. When I look into his eyes, he looks at me with an emotion that makes my stomach clench again and gives me butterflies.

When the bell rings, I take my hand off of his neck. He also takes his hand off my waist. When he pulls his hand away, I feel empty. We don't say a word.

And since I'm the biggest coward in the whole world, I don't say anything and run to my next class, English literature.

I only realise I share the class with Austin when I get there. And since we were partners, we should sit next to each other.

Things couldn't be more strange.

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It took a whole week. Seven days of that dull pain in my hurt. Seven days of that dumb hope that he would at least talk to me. Seven days of me ignoring him at school, but I noticed every little thing he did. Seven days of not paying attention to his stare. For seven days, I had to stop myself from crying over something so stupid.

Seven days of keeping myself from wanting to push him against the wall and kiss him like he had.

He hadn't tried to start a conversation, and I hadn't either.

I know that over time I had grown to care about Austin. I just didn't know how strong the feelings were. I wish it wasn't that deep. I don't like how unsure I feel.

I get out of bed with a sigh after another night of no sleep. I hadn't slept much, and my eyes were hurting a little. Thank goodness it's the weekend today. I get ready and look out the window. It looks like it's going to rain today because the sky is cloudy.

I see the calendar and my heart starts to race.

September 25

I could feel my throat closing up, and tears came to my eyes. How could I forget what day it is? The memory comes back to me so quickly that I can hardly breathe.

I see bits and pieces of memories from the day flash in front of my eyes, and I shake a lot. After a while, I focus on my breathing. Breathing in and out has never been this hard before. When my knees give out, I sit on the floor.

My breathing goes back to normal after about an hour, but I can't stop crying. I think I'll go outside to get my mind off of it.

I put on a thin hoodie and black jeans before going outside my room.

"Morning, Lyra," Kira says from the couch, where she is holding a hot cup of coffee. She looks so calm and cosy in the blanket. For a moment, I think about joining her, but my heavy heart won't let me.

"Good morning."

"Coffee?" she asks, holding out her cup. I shake my head no and leave quickly. I can hear her mumbling something, but I don't want to hear it.

As I walk down the path that leads into the park, I breathe heavily. I let the bad memories come back to me. I don't care when the tears start again. I enjoy the pain for a while, but then I'm not alone anymore.

The sky cries with me. The rain starts with a few small drops here and there. I look up at the sky, where tears are still streaming down my face, and then it starts to rain hard. To be honest, I've never liked the rain, but right now it feels so good. I don't know how long I stay there until I hear some footsteps. My tears mix with the rainwater.

I stop breathing when I turn around. Austin looks at me with confusion as he looks into my eyes and sees how messy I am. Not in my eyes, but into them. Like he's trying to figure it out.

Find out what's wrong.

How did he get to me here?

Austin was completely soaked, but he still looked at me like he knew what was going on in my head. He sighs after a while and takes my cold hand in his. He pulls me out of the park, but this time I don't let him.

I pull my hand away. I hope the heavy rain doesn't show that I'm still crying. I just stand there with my eyes closed.

Austin takes my hand again, and this time he holds it tightly. I try to grab my hand again, but he makes it tighter. To the point of pain.

When he sighs and loosens his grip a little, I wince and try to shake his hand away. He mumbles an apology in a voice so small that I can barely hear it.

I accept him. His hair is black and completely wet, and it's sticking to his forehead. His shirt is also completely wet, and it sticks to his skin, which makes his body look even better.

I don't like that he makes me feel this way. I know. I realise that I don't have the same effect on him.

This time, I let him take my hand when he does. I let him pull me to his car. I let him open the door and let me in. He doesn't mind that I'm getting the leather seats in his car wet.

He turns the heater up. I look out of the car. The rain hasn't stopped yet. We don't have to drive very far to get to his house.

I have a lot of questions, but the sadness inside me is too strong for them. I quickly wipe away some hot tears when we get out of his car.

Austin takes me to his room and puts me on his bed. My clothes are still wet. He goes

into his bathroom and comes back with two towels. He picks one up and pats my hair with it. Something that makes my heart race.

He gives me the other one after a few minutes and then goes into his closet. He gives me a white shirt that he brought with him. He tells me to go to the toilet, and I do.

I take off my jeans and hoodie and put on the shirt, but my hands are shaking. I look at myself in the mirror. The shirt goes up to the middle of my thigh. I don't take off my pants. I walk outside with my wet clothes in my hands and see Austin sitting on the bed.

He has already changed out of his wet clothes, and his wet hair makes him look so... No. I shouldn't think that way.

I see him looking at my form, and he looks happy. He looks at me and tells me to come over.

When he hugs me, I'm surprised. I sigh into his chest because it feels so good. Isn't he sick of being the knight in shining armour?

He says, "I want to show you something."

"I can see the pain in those pretty eyes. I know how to help you let it out. Follow me," he says as he walks outside.

I follow him with a heavy heart that is also a little bit excited.

Do my eyes look nice? All eyes are nice.

Does he think mine is pretty?

He might think that all eyes are pretty.

I just walk behind him, shaking off the thoughts.

I think the word “pretty” is very delicate and a nice way to say something nice about someone.

Austin is standing in front of the door to a room he doesn't know. He looks at me and sighs after a moment of hesitation. Austin looks at me one last time before opening the door wide and telling me to come in.

When I walk in, my hands fly to cover my mouth. My eyes sparkle as I look around the room because there is so much to see. As I look at the walls, trying to take everything in, I forget about my sadness for a moment.

The room is of average size. There are framed canvases of all sizes hanging all over the place, almost completely covering the off-white wallpaper. The feelings in the paintings take my breath away. They say more than words ever could.

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I see now that all of the paintings are painted in shades of grey, even though they are all very pretty. It's amazing how all the paintings are painted in different shades of the same colour and are still so interesting.

I walk up to the wall and look at a painting of a girl. The girl is smiling and looks happy, but the painting makes me want to cry. I go to the next one. The painting shows a man whose features are similar to the girl's, but his expression is different; he looks sad. There is a trail of tears on his cheek.

Some paintings are just plain sad. I see Austin looking at me with a curious look on his face.

I say, "They're beautiful."

He smiles proudly, and I do too.

"Why only shades of grey, Austin?" I ask.

Austin looks at a painting.

"All you see when you see darkness is grey."

His words make me shiver. Then I remember something. This helped me forget my sadness. No, his sadness made me forget mine. It's strange.

"Can I... Do you want to tell me what happened, bunny?"

“I-,” I take a deep breath. He tells me to keep going, and his eyes are so soft that I feel like I’m going to melt.

“I was three. I had this dance competition thing at school,” I say, taking a breath. “My parents were on their way. Then—”

He puts his arms around my waist and pulls me a little closer to him. I look into his brown eyes and feel better. The best shade of brown.

“On this same date, they got into a car accident,” I say. He pulls me close and I quietly put my head on his chest. His heartbeat makes me feel better, and I can feel mine beating in time with his.

He whispers, “I understand, bunny,” and then kisses my hair. A thing that makes me feel warm inside. No, he doesn’t get it. Not even one person can... unless he’s been through the same thing.

I dare to ask, “What happened to you? What made you like this?” as I pull away from him a little.

He clenches his jaw, and I immediately regret asking because I can see the pain in his eyes. It only lasted a moment, but it was clear.

“Oh no, he used my name.” That’s a story for another day, Lyra. That’s not good.

But that’s not fair.

He takes deep breaths, probably to fight his memories, and I feel terrible that I am the cause of all this. I hug him to try to calm him down, just like he always does. He puts his face in my neck and breathes deeply. My heart skips a beat.

We stay like that for a long time before the air gets charged. A hug that used to make you feel better suddenly becomes something else.

His eyes drop to my lips. When he leans in and closes the distance, I part my lips and close my eyes. I had wanted this to happen so badly in the last week. But his lips don't touch mine.

He kisses the edge of my mouth instead.

"I really wanted to do this," he says softly as he slowly moves down my neck. Just the sound of his voice makes me shiver. When he sucks on my neck, I hold on to him and a moan comes out of my mouth. He groans when he hears it and sucks even harder.

When he moves to a different spot, I moan again. When he bites my skin, my nails dig into his arms, and then he licks it to make it feel better. When he moves lower, my toes curl and I moan out loud.

The shirt I'm wearing is too big for me, and the first button is very low, which makes my cleavage very clear. That just gives him more room to lick, bite, and s**k.

He pulls away after a while, looking happy. My lips are still open and I'm breathing hard. He is shocked when I pull him by the neck for another kiss.

This kiss is hard and hurts, unlike our first kiss. At first, I try to take charge, but he bites my bottom lip. I like how he takes charge of the kiss; his tongue gets tangled up with mine, and I moan again. When I kiss him, I try to match his intensity.

We pull back to catch our breath, and I swear I'm red because of how intensely he looks at me.

He says in a deep voice, “I want to give you something.” He still has his arms around me, and I still have mine around him. People would think we were lovers hugging each other.

Yes, that’s right.

“Yeah?” My voice sounds breathy.

“I want to help you paint,” he says. I pay attention.

“Really,” I almost scream.

With a knowing look and a small smile, he says, “Yeah, I can see the passion in you.”

I’m so happy. I kiss his cheek again and squeal. I see that his eyes are getting bigger and his cheeks are turning a little pink, which is almost not noticeable. I take my hand out of the wrapping with a big smile, and he does the same.

“When do we start?” I ask, feeling great.

“Tomorrow, after school.” I smile at his answer because I can’t help but be happy.

“Do you have colours other than grey?” I turn to him. He nods and then goes to the cupboard to get all kinds of paint colours. A lot of different colours. As I walk to see them, my eyes sparkle and I stare at him in awe.

“Why keep these when you only use grey?”

“Because bunny, maybe one day I’ll start painting with other colours too.” He looks at me with a lot of intensity, as if it had something to do with me. That makes me turn away.

“So... after school tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“So, what you’re saying is that he kissed you and then didn’t talk to you for a week,” Skye says, and I nod my head. In school, he just ignored me.

“And then, after a whole week, he gave you hickeys. There were a lot of them, girl, I saw them. Anyway, he gave you hickeys and then he ignored you again. Right?” Skye goes on.

“What?! You saw them?” I turn red.

Skye says with a smirk, “Of course you didn’t cover them well, Lyra. The whole school saw them.”

“Yeah, it’s been two weeks, and well, he’s gone back to ignoring,” I say to get back on track. Jude and Kira are arguing about something, and the crowded cafeteria makes it hard for us to talk.

“He’s a jerk,” Skye says after a while. I look at her sharply before grabbing some fries and eating them.

“Wait, what? He thinks he can do whatever he wants to you and doesn’t care how you feel. You, Lyra, deserve better,” she says.

“I never wanted him, Skye. I don’t need a guy.”

I told her everything that had happened, but I didn’t tell her about Zeke or that I was going to Austin’s house every day after that to learn how to paint. I can’t help but feel hurt by what Austin did.

“How’s it going with Eric?” Skye asks me right when I see Eric next to our table looking at me. He waves to me, and I wave back. Then his friend says something to him, and he looks away.

“That’s great. He’s a good friend,” I say.

“Whoa, Austin is glaring at your ‘good friend,’” Skye says, her eyes wide and her voice very excited.

I turn around and see Austin throwing knives at Eric. Eric nervously looks at his table, knowing that Austin is staring at him.

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“Yeah, they’ve always been like that,” I say with a dry tone.

“Skye says, “Austin is a weird guy,” and I agree.

“Still sexy,” she says, and I feel something strange settle on my chest when she says that. Am I... Are you jealous? No, it can’t be.

Yes, I am.

Skye looks at me knowingly and shakes her head.

A hand grabs my elbow as we get ready to leave for our next class. My heart races, but when I turn around, my face falls. I still smiled.

“Hey, Lyra,” Eric says with a smile that makes him look like a boy. I say a little hi. I can feel hot eyes on me, and I know who is looking at me.

“So... um, I was wondering if I could take you on a... date?” he says nervously. Nice.

Hold on... A what?

“A date?” I squeak. He smiles at me nervously, and his eyes dart to something behind me and then back to me.

“You don’t have to answer me right now,” he says.

“Okay, I’ll let you know by the afternoon.”

After saying goodbye to Eric, I walk to Skye. He goes back to his friend, and I hear his friend cheer. My cheeks get a little warm. I can feel Austin’s angry eyes on me, but I don’t look at him. And I’m sure he didn’t hear what we said.

And I shouldn’t care.

“What did your good friend have to say?”

“He sort of asked me out?”

“Oh, so your good friend wants to be your boyfriend,” Skye says as we walk to the next class. “What did you say?”

“Nothing,” I say, biting my lip.

“Why? What?” Skye screams. “Oh, you like Austin, that’s why,” she says.

“No, that’s not the reason at all.”

We walk into the science class, which is almost full, and sit down in the back.

“That’s exactly why, babe,” Skye says, rolling her eyes. “But you have to tell him something. He didn’t ask you to be his girlfriend; it’s just a date. I say go for it.”

I think about it.

“Okay,” I say to her. I wish it was the brown-eyed devil who would ask me out instead of Eric. I let out a sigh as I try to focus on the teacher’s chatter, which had already started.

The day goes by very quickly. Eric was happy when I told him I would go. He told me he would take me out to dinner at 7. So I had to go to Austin's house earlier than usual.

I knock on his door, and after a while, he lets me in. He has on a black sleeveless shirt and gym trousers. I don't like it when he wears sleeveless clothes because his muscles are distracting.

And I hate it when he sees me drooling at the sight.

He says with a smirk, "You can stare all you want, bunny, but let's get inside first." He laughs when I mumble, "I wasn't staring," before going inside.

We enter the room. I see the canvas at the other end of the room right away. There are two eyes painted on the wall, and they aren't grey, which is surprising. Or any colour but blue.

I tell myself that he painted the eyes of another girl, not mine, to calm my heart. That thought makes my heart race, but I'm glad he at least used some other colours. Austin sees where I'm looking and runs to cover it.

Then we walk to the other corner of the room, which I like to call my spot. Austin helps me with a new piece of art. I have to say that Austin is a great teacher. And a kisser. And I didn't say it.

He gives me a brush and says, "Today we will play with strokes."

He said that. Lyra!

He gives me acrylic paints and says, "Use sharp edges only when you want to paint something serious. Use soft edges when you want to paint something happy."

“Can I paint a sunset?” I ask, my voice full of excitement. He laughs a little and says, “Go ahead.”

“I want you to use the crosshatching painting technique,” he says before walking behind me and sitting in one of the chairs that face me.

I begin with the sun. But I stop when my phone rings in my pocket. Before I went back to painting, I put it in the speaker.

I say, “Hello.”

“Lyra, please tell me you didn’t forget about the date. Are you having second thoughts?” Skye shouts.

“No,” I say, but I’m cut off.

“As sexy as Austin is, Eric is sweet, okay? Besides, Austin is a jerk. But Austin and your kids would be beautiful.” My eyes widen, and I quickly pull out my phone and put it on do not disturb.

“I’m going on the date, Skye. I’ll call you later,” I say quickly before hanging up.

I don’t want to turn around and look at Austin, so I keep painting.

After a while, Austin says, “A date?” in a hard tone, as if he didn’t understand. I swallow hard and turn to face him.

I smile at him as best I can, hoping to get rid of the anger in his eyes.

No, hold on. He can’t be mad. Not after acting like nothing happened between us. I stop smiling and get back to painting.

“With who?”

I don’t have to answer, so I don’t. Oh, but I’d love to see the jealousy if that’s possible.

“Eric,” I say coldly after a few seconds.

“What if he is just like Zeke?”

I stop. A lot of ideas come to mind. No, I won’t let him control me.

“Don’t you dare mess with me, Austin,” I say in a low voice. My voice is about to break. I keep painting angry red strokes around the sun.

“Lyra, not bunny,” I said.

“Are you jealous, Austin?” I turn to him with one eyebrow raised and a forced smile on my lips. He looks surprised when I accuse him, but he doesn’t say anything.

I go back to painting.

He says softly, “You shouldn’t trust people easily, bunny.” Are we back to saying bunny?

“I shouldn’t trust you either,” I say, and I wish I hadn’t said it right away. I know it’s not the same; he’s saved me so many times. I have no reason to doubt him.

I slowly turn around to look at him, and when I see his face change from hurt to something else, I almost gasp. But he quickly hides it. But he still has his jaw clenched and isn’t looking at me. He gets up and walks away instead.

I choose to walk after him to say I'm sorry, but when I get outside, I can't see him. I feel guilty, and I look for him everywhere, but I can't find him.

I have to go home. If not, I'll be late for the date.

...I think that I attract jerks. Just mean people. Or maybe there aren't any good people left.

I blink away the tears and look at my phone one last time. There are no messages. I just got stood up on my first date, which is great. I straighten my pastel pink dress, which I was dumb enough to buy and which cost more than three of my other dresses put together.

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I walk home, trying my best not to cry. Why do bad things happen to me?

I had done a lot to look good. I bought some makeup and curled my hair loosely. I wish I hadn't done any of it. Eric didn't even text or call me to let me know why he didn't come.

I texted Eric while I was on my way.

I know things come up at the last minute, but Eric, it would have been nice to have a little more warning.

I can get home without crying, but once I get to my door, I can't stop myself. I cry and get inside, locking the door behind me.

"Bunny?" I can't even begin to describe how shocked I was. I stare at Austin with wide eyes.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, my voice breaking.

"I came to... uh, give you your... your bag. You left it at my house," he says, scratching his neck because he knows he's lying. I didn't forget my bag at his house. But I let that go.

"Who let you in?"

"I think her name was Kira."

I walk to my room with a sigh, wiping away a hot tear that has rolled down my face. But before I can go in, a very familiar muscular chest pulls me in. This makes more tears fall. Austin pats my back as I cry and sniffle every so often.

“Please don’t cry, bunny,” he whispers sweet things in my ear.

He pulls back for a moment to check my body for any injuries. When he’s sure there aren’t any, he pulls me back to him.

“I just wanted my first date to be perfect,” I say. He gets stiff, but he doesn’t stop to pat my back.

“Don’t cry, baby. He’s a jerk,” he says softly. Austin, you are too. You are too. You’re playing with my heart.

The mixed signals are driving me crazy.

I mumble, “I hate him.”

He says “Me too” in a low voice and then kisses my forehead. I sigh because of how it feels. My tears are slowly drying up.

After a moment, I say, “I’m sorry, Austin.” If that’s possible, his soft look gets even softer. “For telling you I shouldn’t trust you,” I say before putting my face back into his chest.

“Shh, bunny. I know you didn’t mean it.” His hand running up and down my back makes my heart race and I feel myself melt.

How many times have we been in this situation? Isn’t he tired of being the hero?

Austin asks, "I'm guessing he didn't show up?" I shake my head.

He looks down at me and says, "How about I take you to dinner? We don't want all this to go to waste." All of this, like my hair, makeup, and dress?

"Right now, I look terrible."

Austin rolls his eyes. "You look beautiful, Lyra." My cheeks get hot.

I ask him softly, "Is it going to be like a date?" and look at him in disbelief. He laughs.

"Okay, bunny."

Are you sure? What kind of response is that? I don't think about it.

"Okay, let me fix myself up a bit. Thank you, Austin," I say as I stand on my tiptoes and kiss him on the cheek before going to my room. I don't miss how his eyes get darker and his lips part when I kiss his cheek.

I hate how my hair and makeup look when they are all messed up. I wash my face and dry it off with a towel, then I comb my hair and put it up in a side bun.

I don't wear as much makeup as I used to; just a little lipstick and mascara. I stand in front of the mirror and check out how I look. Not too bad.

And I'm glad I don't regret buying this pink dress anymore. It feels just right. I put on a pair of pink earrings that match.

I take one last look at myself before I leave my room. I don't get why my heart is beating so fast now that I'm on my way to meet Eric. And for some reason, I'm not

even mad at Eric anymore.

And he will never get another chance, and I have a feeling there is another reason for it.

A larger one.

After I go outside, I close my bedroom door and see Austin sitting on the couch. When he sees me, he stands up and I can feel his eyes slowly moving down my body. This makes me feel hot and fuzzy.

Butterflies.

I also look at how he looks. He wore a light blue button-up shirt and black trousers, with the sleeves rolled up to show his forearms. His toned chest sticks out from under his shirt, and I can't help but bite my lips.

The air feels thick and the tension in the room rises. Austin looks at me like he wants something. Like when you're really hungry but the food is too hot and you can't stop looking at it.

When he turns around and picks something up off the couch and hands it to me, I'm surprised.

A small bouquet of red and white flowers.

My heart beats faster. When did he get it?

I take it from him, say thank you, and put it in a vase.

I say, "Uh... we should go," and my voice sounds a little breathy. Austin looks at me

for a few more seconds before reaching out his hand and I take it.

“Hey, Lyra. Where are you going?” Kira yells from her room.

“Dinner. I’ll be back in an hour or two,” I yell back before going outside.

Austin takes me to a restaurant that is a bit too fancy for me. I’m glad I wore this dress again. I would be so out of place otherwise. We talk about dumb things during dinner, not serious things.

We lose track of time, and when we leave the restaurant, it’s midnight. He drives me home, and even though the ride is quiet, it’s very comfortable.

I lean against the window and fall asleep because it’s so comfortable. After a while, I feel like a hard but soft thing is lifting me up and holding me. When I snuggle up closer, it makes it laugh.

I smile before I fall asleep again, burying my face in whatever it was.

It pulls me in closer.

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I wake up in my bed, which is late because of Austin. But I have to admit that it was a lot of fun. I put on a peach t-shirt and jeans and tie my hair back in a ponytail. I take an apple and run to school. In a very real sense.

It's a very busy day, and by lunchtime, I'm so tired. Skye is the same.

As we walk to our table, she says, "I hate school." I laugh at her and sit down.

"So, how was your date?" Skye asks, and the tiredness in her eyes is gone. Wow.

"Well, it was great, but..."

"What? Did you kiss?" Skye screams. I tell her to be quiet.

"Eric didn't come," I say with a sigh. Skye looks unhappy.

"Then how was it great? Did you have an imaginary friend with you or something?" I roll my eyes at her question.

"No, Austin took me out."

"What's wrong?" Skye chokes on her spit, and I pat her back. A few tables turn to face us. Why did it seem so crazy?

Skye asks, "You don't think it's strange?" No, I shake my head. What makes it so suspicious?

“So, Eric asks you out, but he doesn’t show up. Instead, Austin shows up out of nowhere and takes you out. And don’t forget that Eric and Austin are in a cold war.”

I’m either stupid or I trust people too easily. In any case, I’m dumb. And can’t see.

“I can confirm that Austin had something to do with it.”

I ask, “Have you seen, Eric?” as I look around.

“I haven’t seen him,” Skye says.

“So did Austin ask you to be his girlfriend?” Skye sounds hopeful. I shake my head and do my best not to show how sad I am.

“Oh, my poor Lyra. He might just be scared that you’ll say no. Why don’t you ask him?”

“Does he want to be my boyfriend?”

“Yes.”

“No way,” I say, and my voice gets a little high.

“Think about it. I know you like him, and I think he likes you too.”

Yes, that’s right.

I walk to the room where the painting is. My eyes go back to his painting, and my heart stops beating. The blue eyes are painted perfectly, and the whole face is painted

too. The girl's lips are curled into a smile, and there are white flowers in her long blonde hair.

And she is wearing a pink dress that looks very familiar. Austin covers it up like it's nothing, but I'm still frozen.

It's me.

Austin did my makeup.

A painting of me in lots of colours.

I'm breathing too fast.

Don't worry.

I can tell Austin doesn't want to talk about it by looking at him. So, I let it go for now, hoping he would bring it up when it's done. I gasp as I start to uncover my canvas. It looks bad. Yesterday, my anger got the best of me.

When he shakes his head at my painting, I give him a sheepish smile. The sun doesn't even look like it. It's not even close to round.

I take it off, and Austin helps me put on a new canvas. I look at him and wait for him to tell me what we are going to do today.

Instead, he sighs and rubs his neck in an awkward way before looking me in the eye.

"I... I want you to... well, do something for me, bunny."

"Yeah?" I frown.

Austin says in a voice that makes my heart race, “I have a family dinner tomorrow. Will you come with me?” There is so much emotion in his brown eyes when he looks at me.

“Please,” he whispers.

“Of course. I will,” I say with a smile. He looks relieved and sighs when I don’t ask him anything.

Why me?

What’s going on? We kissed, went out on a date, and now I was going to meet his family. And he still hadn’t asked me to be his girlfriend. Doesn’t he want me?

Why do I feel so bad?

I hold up the two dresses and ask, “Black or Lavender?”

Kira says, “Lavender,” and then rolls her eyes. “You’ll look like yourself in lavender—sweet, shy, and all.”

“I don’t think I can do it,” I say with a sigh.

“Don’t worry about it, babe,” Kira says, popping her gum and giving me a warm look.

“I wish I could be as sure of myself as you are,” I say to her as I sit next to her in bed. She was strong, sure of herself, and able to do things on her own. Would I ever be one of those?

She left because her parents were abusive, and now she has to live alone. I was happy

that she was starting to talk to me. They say you shouldn't judge a book by its cover. But I don't think I'd tell anyone what happened.

"And I wish I was as sweet as you. You know you should love yourself for who you are," she says, rolling her eyes.

"Kira, you can be nice, though."

"And Lyra, you can be sure," she says in a very high-pitched voice. This time, I roll my eyes.

"Now go change. I'll do your hair and make-up," she says before falling back on my bed. I shake my head at her and go to the toilet.

The lavender dress is casual and comes down to my knees. The dress has a sweetheart neckline and long sleeves, and it fits my body like a second skin. It doesn't look too revealing, but it does make me feel sexy.

As soon as I leave the bathroom, someone pulls me in front of the dressing table. Kira starts to braid my hair as I sit down. It's so complicated, and I don't know what she's doing.

After she's done, I can't believe how good my hair looks. Who would have thought that a bird's nest could be turned into a work of art?

Kira starts with my face, and after a long time, she's done. I gasp when I open my eyes. I thought she had done something bad, but it looks so normal.

I scream with joy and hug her, but she pulls away.

"You'll ruin everything," she says firmly. I roll my eyes and put on matching heels

that I borrowed from Kira.

“Thank you,” I say one last time, and she pushes me to the door, laughing quietly. We say goodbye.

I see Austin waiting behind the door. How long has he been here?

I say “Hi” shyly when he looks at me with something like love in his eyes. Pfft, like that.

He says “Hi” in that deep voice of his and then gives me flowers, this time white roses. He is wearing a black tuxedo over his muscular chest. My mouth is watering at what I see.

Don’t.

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“Why don’t you two f**k and get over each other?” an amused voice says.

“Hayden,” Austin growls before he turns around. A man who is older than Austin comes. He wears leather on his body. Leather pants, leather jacket and leather boots. Oh boy. It looks like he owns a leather factory.

His face looks like Austin’s. But his eyes are hazel, not brown like Austin’s. I can tell that they are naughty. His hair is also shorter, but it is still midnight black. His face is perfect and his jaw is sharp. But I don’t think I like his face as much as Austin’s.

And I didn’t say it.

No, I didn’t.

“You must be Lyra,” he says, stopping in front of me and taking my hand in his. This makes me blush. Then he bows down and kisses my knuckles.

Hayden says, “Nice to meet you, beautiful.”

“Same,” I say in a hoarse voice. Austin takes my hand from Hayden’s before I even know it.

“We have to go,” Austin grumbles before pulling me along to the lift. Someone is in a bad mood. Or maybe they’re just envious. The idea that makes my heart race.

Hayden follows us, and I hear him laugh deeply.

Austin says, “He’s my half brother.” Of course, they looked a lot alike.

Austin whispers in my ear, “By the way, you look beautiful.” I blush and smile shyly at him. I’m glad Kira didn’t put blush on me; I’d look like a tomato.

It’s too quiet in the car. The air is hot and charged, and every now and then I hear Hayden mumbling about “the s****l tension in the car.”

We get there in an hour. Austin parks the car and gets out to let me in. Sir.

He takes my hand and we walk inside, with Hayden following us again. The restaurant is very fancy. My plain lavender dress makes me feel a little out of place. Austin’s hand is on the small of my back.

We go into a private room. There are two couples sitting there, and they smile when they see us. You don’t have to be a genius to see that the smiles are fake.

We give each other hugs. Austin’s parents are divorced, it turns out. Austin gets his looks from his dad. He still looks good, even with grey hair. Austin tells me that his hands are around his fourth wife. Hayden is the son of his second wife.

And they are all very rich, which is why they have a mansion.

I just realised something: Austin must have a lot of stepbrothers and sisters.

On the other hand, his mother doesn’t seem to care that we’re there because she keeps talking to her fiancé and whispering to him, and sometimes they kiss.

They seem like they want to be anywhere but here.

What kind of meal is this?

I know I shouldn't judge. But I have to say that this family is very dysfunctional.

Observation.

At least he has one.

When something warm touches my bare thigh halfway through dinner, I almost spit out the water. Austin's palm is comfortably resting there, and his fingers are slowly making up patterns in the air. I can't believe what I'm seeing on his face.

He looks like he's really thinking. His fingers keep tracing patterns on my thigh without him knowing it. I breathe deeply. I look around and see that everyone is lost in their own world. Austin's mother is kissing his fiancée while his father whispers something in his wife's ear.

Hayden is giving the waitress a dark look, and I know that look very well. Someone is going to have s*x tonight.

What kind of meal is this?

I put my hand over Austin's to stop him from moving. I look at his face again and see him looking down at our hands on my thigh. He seems to realise what's going on, and just when I think he's going to take his hand away, he does it again, this time very purposefully.

When his brown eyes meet mine, a smirk comes over his lips. I almost gasp when his warm hand moves up a little higher.

I hold back a moan and squeeze my thighs together. His smirk gets twice as big.

It's going to be a long night.

I grit out, “What are you doing?” as his hands keep up the sweet t*****e. He laughs at how flustered I am, and when I let out a breathy moan, his eyes get darker.

“F**k, bunny,” he groans when I bite my lips to keep from moaning again and look at him. When his knuckles touch my pants, I almost jump out of my seat.

I stand up and walk to the ladies’ room, breathing heavily. Austin, who is very amused, stays behind and laughs silently.

I look at myself in the mirror and see how flustered I am. My eyes are wide open, and I’m breathing heavily like I just ran a marathon. I put on my lipstick and then fixed my hair. My heart is racing in my chest.

But when I see another girl sitting in my spot, I freeze. When Austin whispers something in her ear and she giggles, my heart stops. She leans in towards Austin, touches his forearms, and then says something back.

The girl is not at all like me. She could easily be the most beautiful girl in the world with her model-like body and angelic face. That’s a little too much, but you get it.

And I know that Austin deserves someone like her and not a loser like me.

But it hurts. It hurts a lot.

“Daisy,” a voice behind me makes me jump. I turn around and look at Hayden.

Hayden says, “She’s Daisy, Austin’s best friend from when they were kids.” He must have known I was sad because he put his hand on my arm and looked at me with concern.

He asks, “Do you want to leave?” I think about it for a second before I nod. Hayden

takes my hand, which surprises me. I realise that I don't feel the same way I do with Austin.

We walk down to the bar and sit on the bar stool.

Hayden asks me, "What do you want?"

I say, "Just lemonade," and his eyes widen in surprise, but he still tells the barman to get it. He asks for a berry red drink for himself.

I ask, "How old are you?"

"Twenty, you?"

"Seventeen," I say and take a sip of the lemonade. It tastes good and makes me feel better.

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“Aw, you’re a kid. Kid, I can tell you really like Austin,” he says, and I try not to choke on the lemonade.

“I am not a child, and he doesn’t like me back,” I say after a few seconds, sighing.

“Lyra, he’s been through a lot. He’s just scared,” Hayden says before taking a sip of his drink. It looks really good.

“But he can’t do this to me. He can’t leave me hanging like this,” I say angrily.

Hayden nods and says, “I agree.”

“Whoa,” he says when I take the drink from his hand and drink it all. I regret it right away. My throat hurts when I feel it.

Hayden sighs and says, “Lyra, you have to understand.”

“What do you mean? Tell me,” I say with a glare.

He says with a sad smile, “It’s not my place to say, Lyra.” Hayden is cool.

“Please, please, please, tell me something.”

Hayden seems to be torn.

“Please,” I say slowly. The drink makes me feel strange.

He finally gives in.

“He lost his twin sister, which was very hard on him. He hasn’t been the same since. Until today, when I saw him with you, he finally looked happy. I haven’t seen him smile in years.”

I asked the barman for another drink of the same alcohol, whatever it was, even though I knew I didn’t have any money on me. I knew Hayden would pay for it. Was I being a jerk?

I see that he is looking at me with concern.

“What happened to his twin sister?”

“Lyra.”

“Hayden,” I say with a pout.

He sighs before he tells me.

“A few robbers broke in. They were alone. Austin somehow found out about them and hid, but he didn’t get to tell Miranda. When she said she’d call the police, they shot her dead.”

I take a drink of alcohol after swallowing the lump in my throat.

Austin blames himself for Miranda’s death. Things got worse when Mom and Dad got divorced and even worse when Dad remarried. Mom left us in anger, and Dad did too after a few days. I went to college and had to leave Austin alone, which made him even more depressed and stuff”, Hayden says. My heart hurts for Austin.

“Austin doesn’t like me that much, Hayden. He looked comfortable with Daisy. I think he likes Daisy more,” I say with a sad smile. I ask for another glass.

“He’s just trying to make you mad—”

I laugh as I lean on Hayden. I feel like I need some rest. He keeps me going.

A voice I know says, “That’s too much,” but I don’t turn around. I don’t want to see his face.

The barman gives me another glass anyway, and I drink it down again, but someone takes the glass from my hand. I get up and look the devil in the eye.

“Give it to me,” I say in a cold voice as I get up from my chair. His eyes get big for a second, but then he calms down and glares at me. I try to grab it from him, but the alcohol I drank makes me dizzy and I trip, spilling the drink all over Austin.

When I see his clenched jaws, my heart skips a beat.

“I’m sorry,” I say softly to him. The berry red drink has soaked his tuxedo, and I can’t help but feel worse.

“I am so sorry,” I say again, and my voice breaks.

“Hey, it’s okay. Bunny, please don’t cry,” Austin says as he rushes in front of me and wipes away some tears. I didn’t realise I was crying. And I didn’t even know why I was sad. I bit my lips to keep from crying. Is it booze?

Austin sighs, “Let’s get you home.” I laugh for no reason at all. I remember that I was crying. I laugh again.

“You are drunk,” he says.

I glare at him and say, “No shit, Sherlock.” When he takes off the tuxedo, I can’t believe how amazing he looks. Now he is only wearing a white shirt. He looks good. I laugh at the thought.

He asks me, “What’s so funny?”

“I think you look yummy,” I say again, laughing. He shakes his head and smiles a little. He holds me by the waist and we walk to the car.

“Where is Hayden?” I slur my words a little. I can feel him getting stiff next to me.

“He left,” Austin says with a blank look and puts me in the car. I fall asleep on the way, happy to be in the dark.

Before I fall asleep, I say, “Austin,” and my eyes are about to close. He looks so pretty when I look at him. I wonder if I’m jealous because I’m falling for Austin.

“Yes, bunny?”

“I like Hayden.”

“Hm.”

“Austin?”

“Yes?”

I keep bringing things up about him.

He's always there for me.

He makes me feel things I've never felt before.

He hugs and kisses me like no one else.

He makes me feel like I'm loved.

And most importantly, he looks tasty.

"Hey, Austin?"

"Yes, honey?"

"I like you."

"I like you too, bunny."

"Austin?"

He laughs before saying yes again.

"I think I love you." I close my eyes and let the dark take me.

I shut my eyes as soon as I open them. Is it just me, or does the world seem too bright sometimes?

I open them again after a short time. I know I shouldn't have drunk that much because my head hurts a little. But it really did help.

At least I wasn't sad then.

But I am now. It might have made me feel better for a night, but it doesn't change the fact. He means a lot to me, but maybe I don't mean as much to him. The fact that I am hopelessly falling for him and he might not be.

Or maybe I've already fallen for him. Well, at least he doesn't know it.

I take a shower and get ready. I put on one of my favourite dresses, a floral one that came to my knees, and tied my hair back. I even put on some light make-up. And I didn't do it to make anyone happy.

Today is a sunny day, and for once, I like it. It makes me happy, and maybe that's because I'm about to do something crazy.

I'm going to ask Austin if he wants to go out with me.

He had me convinced that I was strong. He had helped me figure out who I was. He was there when no one else was. He deserves someone who will love him no matter what, after everything he went through. And I would do everything I could to give him what he needs.

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Skye said I could do it, and Hayden said Austin was just scared because it was new to him. Hayden even told me he liked me too. That's two people, and they're very different. And one person can be wrong, but two can't. Correct?

I couldn't help but wonder what he would say. And every time I thought about it, I couldn't help but blush. So, for the first three classes, I thought about it while I was dreaming, sometimes paying attention to the lecture, and then again.

At lunch, Skye, Kira, and I sat next to Jude. They kept talking about Zeke's disappearance.

"I heard his dad died, so he had to go back to Spain," Skye says, her eyes wide. I almost choke on my own spit. What?

"Still, he went away. He should have said something before he left."

I bit my lip to keep from saying anything. It might have been better if they didn't know.

Jude looked sadder than the rest. If they only knew the truth.

Jude tried to make things better by saying that he was the only guy in the group and that soon he would be a girl or at least gay. While I eat lunch, I zone out of what they're saying.

I think about Austin again. I nervously turn around to look at his table, but he's not there.

“Hey, Lyra.”

I get up and put my hand on my heart, which is racing. I turn around to look at Austin. My friends are looking at us with interest.

“Yeah?”

“Can I borrow you for a second? I need to talk to you about something.”

“Of course.”

I go outside with Austin and we walk to the school garden. But there are too many people there, so we decide to go to the empty old building that has a lot of history for me. Or should I say, connected to us?

I can't stop thinking about what he has to say, and my heart feels like it's going to explode. I'm so excited that I feel dizzy.

But something seems off about him today. His hair is a mess and there are bags under his eyes. He looks like he's in trouble, and that makes me feel bad.

Isn't this the wrong time to ask him to be my boyfriend?

Austin asks, “Do you remember last night?” after ten years. We stand in front of the old building, and thankfully, no one is there.

“Not much,” I say. Well, I remember the dinner, and now I'm blushing. I also remember Daisy. I can still remember getting drunk. And the part where Hayden told me why Austin acted the way he did. I can't remember anything after that.

He asks, “You don't remember what you said?” with hope in his eyes.

“What do you mean, Austin?”

He sighs, and I can tell he’s disappointed but also relieved. Is that even possible?

“It’s okay, then. We should go back,” Austin says with a blank face. I can see how much he had started to show his feelings. Why isn’t he showing them again?

“Wait,” I say in a high voice. He stops and stares at me.

I nervously look down at my feet. My palms are sweaty and my throat is dry because I’m nervous. Still, I talk.

“Will you be my boyfriend?”

The cold, uncomfortable silence around us makes my heart hurt as I wait for him to answer. I look at him and my heart breaks.

He looks at me like I said something gross.

“Why?” he asks.

“I- uh nothing,” I say, trying my best not to let my voice break.

“Listen, Lyra,” he says with a sigh as he runs his hand over his face. He moves a little closer, but there is still at least two feet between us.

When I look at him, a new glimmer of hope shines in me.

“I don’t go out with people.”

My heart, which was already broken, breaks even more.

“But-but don’t you like me?” I stutter, looking into his eyes in the hope of finding out what was going on. Was this not a joke?

“Like?” Austin laughs coldly. “It’s just a crush, Lyra. We’ll get over it.”

My heart breaks and everything hurts. A hot tear runs down my face. I can see his eyes following it, but he doesn’t wipe it off. And the look on his face doesn’t give anything away.

“So, that’s it?” My voice breaks, and more tears fall down my cheeks.

“Yeah,” he says with a blank look before turning to me one last time and leaving.

When he is far away, he yells, “You’ll be late for your next class, bunny.” With that, my tears fall quickly, and I can feel the pain in my chest. I have trouble breathing and bite my bottom lip to hide a sob.

If it was just a passing interest, why does it hurt so much?

Is this what they mean by “heartbreak”?

I remember how happy I was when he said he had something to say.

I remember how happy I was when I thought about asking him to be my boyfriend.

I remember putting on this dress and makeup for him.

That’s when something from last night comes to mind.

“I think I love you, Austin,” I had said.

The dull ache in my heart gets worse until I can feel a little pain in my heart. Pain in the body. I cry and feel embarrassed.

What did I do wrong? What did I do wrong? Why me, God? Why?

Why?

I felt like I had lost a big thing that day. But I had lost something I never had. It didn't even make sense.

But it might have made sense. He was the only good thing that had ever happened to me, after all.

Did I ask for too much?

I wipe my eyes.

I look at the girl I love. She smiles at me, and her pink lips stretch out into a warm smile that makes my heart melt. Her baby blue eyes are sparkling with happiness, and I remember that I've always loved the colour of her eyes.

"Hey, dude, stop looking at the painting," Hayden says. I don't pay attention to him. He doesn't know what it's like.

She will never give me that smile again. So, I guess I'll just look at the painting,

which is the only one I've ever painted that has colour.

Hayden calls out again, "You've been looking at the painting for an hour." I let out a sigh. It's nothing; I had been looking at it all night. He has no idea.

I take a shaky breath and leave the room, avoiding Hayden. I walk to the mirror when I get to my room.

I don't deserve Lyra. She doesn't deserve a messed up guy who can't show her love. I can only hurt her. I see her face with tears in my mind, and I feel rage building inside me. She was crying because of me.

She got hurt because of me.

"I think I love you, Austin."

"Will you be my boyfriend?"

"I think you look delicious."

I grab a vase and throw it against the wall. The glass falls on me, but it's not enough. Next, I hit the mirror in front of me. I enjoy the pain and look at the mirror that is broken. It's still not enough.

Hayden shouts, "Dude, stop." I hit him in the jaw. He hits me back, and my nose breaks. The pain still isn't enough.

This isn't the same as what Lyra felt.

"Use your f*****g brain, idiot," Hayden yells. I breathe hard. My fist and nose hurt, but my heart keeps beating.

“I don’t deserve Lyra.”

Hayden mumbles, “Damn right, you don’t,” and “She doesn’t deserve a crazy idiot.”

Hayden sighs and looks at me.

“So, be the man she needs.”

He glares at me and then leaves the room.

Be the man she needs?

She should be with someone who loves her no matter what. Someone who doesn’t hurt her. Someone she can always count on. Someone who can provide what she needs. She’s too innocent for me, too innocent.

Is it possible for me to do it?

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But I wouldn't be doing it for her, would I? I would do it for me. I was hooked on her. She was the best kind of drug. I smile when I think of her soft lips on my cheeks. Her hugs were the warmest and most comforting.

Her hair smelt better than anything else.

She was my Lyra. My planet, my solar system, my moon, my star, and my whole f*****g universe.

The colour of my life.

And I was going crazy without her.

I don't care if I sound crazy, but I loved her. I love her so much.

I remember how much pain was in her eyes when I said it was just an attraction. I was lying to myself when I said I didn't love her. But I had to hurt her because it would be easier that way. I thought it would be easy if she hated me, but I was wrong.

I couldn't get her sad eyes out of my head.

Be the kind of person she deserves.

That might be possible for me. I can give it a shot. I'll give it a shot.

I walk down the stairs, but before I can get outside, a hand on my shoulder stops me.

“Do you want to scare her away? Have you seen yourself?”

Hayden was right again. I looked terrible. I didn't have a second to waste. I hurry to my room, take a quick shower and put on the best shirt and trousers I have. I also put on my best cologne.

I go thirty miles over the speed limit and don't get a ticket, thank goodness. I couldn't afford to be late. I run to the lift and wait impatiently. The lift takes forever to get me to her floor.

I knock on her door impatiently. It won't open. I knock again, and my heart beats a thousand times a second.

I take a deep breath when the door opens. But my bunny doesn't open the door. Disappointment sets in.

Kira asks, “What do you want, shithead?”

“Where is Lyra?”

“Leave. She's not here,” she says, putting her hand on her waist.

“Tell me where she is,” I say.

“Why? To hurt her again?”

“Okay, I love her,” I yell in anger. She looks at me with suspicion and her eyes widen in surprise. She lets out a sigh a moment later.

“She left. She doesn't live here anymore.”

“What do you mean she doesn’t live here anymore?” We just talked about it yesterday. I broke her heart just yesterday, more like.

I can’t help but get angry when Kira flinches at my voice. Where did she go? Where did my bunny go?

Kira says, “Her uncle’s house.” She said something about a break.

My bunny had been through too much with everything that had happened with Zeke. This place had only caused her problems. I felt bad for her, but I was going to make it up to her.

“What time does her flight leave?”

Kira says, “She’s already on board.”

I don’t waste any time and call Hayden. My feet take me to the lift.

“Yeah?” he says after a moment.

“Hayden, I, um, need to borrow your private jet?”

I can hear Hayden mumbling in the background about how whipped I was and how he would kill me if anything happened to his jet. Like I’m the one who’s driving it.

But my mind was on something else. I had to get some pretty flowers and chocolate. Girls thought it was romantic, right? I also had to buy a helmet. In case my bunny had sharp claws, if you know what I mean.

And I didn’t have a lot of time.

I'm coming, bunny. I hope you still love me. I really can't handle it any other way.

For the thirteenth time that hour, I rub my sweaty hands on my jeans-covered thighs.

I ask softly, "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"I mean, do you really want to?"

"Yes, bunny."

"But—" I am cut off by a groan from my throat. I nervously turn my head to the side and look at Austin. For a moment, his eyes leave the road and stay on my face before going back to the road.

"I really don't care what people think, okay? If anything, I want every f*****g human to see us together," he says softly. I let out a sigh and look outside, wondering what people would think.

I find myself looking at him again. His brown hair is messy on the side, which makes him look great. His eyes stay on the road, and I can't help but think about how good he looks with that serious look on his face.

"Hey, Austin?"

"Yes, baby?"

"Do you remember my first day of school?" I try to forget about it.

“Of course, bunny. You looked so cute and lost, like a bunny,” he says with a smile. I laugh softly, and that’s how the nickname came about.

“How did you know where I was? You saved me from those guys, but how did you find me?”

“I had a bad feeling when I saw you going the wrong way,” Austin says. When his ears turn a light pink, I laugh.

“And...” I drawl out, knowing there was more to say.

“I might have followed you,” he says in a low voice. I laugh loudly and lean over to kiss him on the ears, which are very pink. Who would have thought this guy could be so cute?

When Austin pulls the car into the school, my nerves come back. He tells me to stay there after he parks. He gets out and unlocks my door. When we walk into school hand in hand, I can feel the heat rise in my neck.

“Uh... Austin,” I mumble, “everyone is looking.”

Austin looks down at me and smiles like a boy. Then he leans down and kisses my lips. I gasp loudly, and he laughs softly.

He whispers in my ear, “I hope everyone saw that too, my bunny.” Then we start walking to the locker. People are staring at us now, and my face feels like it’s on fire. I see my friends Skye, Sam, and Jude looking at me with big smiles on their faces.

He waits patiently while I get my books ready for the first class. Literature in English. I smile at the memories of the class that brought Austin and me together.

I do, however, see some movement out of the corner of my eye. I turn my head to the side and see Eric looking at me. It looks more like he's glaring at Austin and me. He runs away when I look at him. In a literal sense.

I turn around and look at Austin.

“What was that?”

Austin shrugs and says nothing, which reminds me that Eric never showed up for the date and Austin had something to do with it.

“What did you do, Austin?” I turn all the way around and put one hand on my waist.

“What?” He asks again, sounding innocent. Too innocent. I glare at him, turn around, and slam the locker door loudly.

I hear Austin call me “Bunny,” but I ignore him and go the same way Eric did. I needed to know what had happened.

Austin calls out again, “Lyra!” I let him go.

After looking around, I see Eric sitting on one of the benches outside. I sit next to him, and his eyes get big. He stands up to leave.

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“Eric, wait,” I say with a groan. “Please,” I say. He takes a deep breath before sitting down.

I ask softly, “What’s wrong?” He doesn’t say anything.

I push, “What did Austin do?” He laughs coldly, and I take a deep breath. That was not like him at all.

“What would he do? He hit me because I asked you out,” he says through gritted teeth before getting up and leaving. I chase after him.

“Eric, why are you mad at me? I didn’t tell him to do it!” I say in frustration. He spins around.

He sighs, “I really like you, Lyra.” I press my lips together and look down.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Eric says with a sigh.

I say, “We can still be friends.” “And Austin will say he’s sorry.”

“Of course, unless Austin decides to beat me up again.” He laughs and hugs me. I feel like someone is watching me, and I see Austin glaring at us before he walks away.

Oh no.

I say to Eric, "I'll see you later?"

"Sure," he says. I sigh and run after my angry boyfriend, who thinks he can beat someone up and then be mad.

"Austin," I say. He doesn't say anything and walks to the garden, where he sits down and lies down. He shuts his eyes.

I say "Austin" again before I sit down. He doesn't pay attention to me and grits his teeth.

"Why did you do that to Eric?" I almost scream. He clenches his jaw painfully when I ask him. He sits down and opens his eyes. His brown eyes are so dark that they look more black than brown.

He doesn't answer, but I'm going to stick to my guns. He finally gives in.

"Because he is everything I am not. I was scared, okay?" he says through gritted teeth.

"Afraid that you'd like him. Afraid that you and him would be together," he clenches his jaw before continuing, "he is sweet, like you said. I am not. And, seeing you hug him like that. I know I was wrong but," Austin sighs and shakes his head. Before he hides it with anger, I can see that he is sad.

He gets up to leave, but I stay where I am. He begins to walk away.

"I love you, okay?" I yell at him.

"I love you, Austin. Not him, not anyone but you. You were the one who wouldn't ask me out," I say with a sigh. His eyes get big as he turns around. The sun hits him, and for a moment, I just stare at him. How did I ever meet someone like him? No one

else had stayed that long.

“Say that again,” he says.

I get up and go to him. There isn’t anyone around us, so maybe the class has already started.

When we’re close enough, I whisper, “I love you?” and our chests touch.

“Again,” he whispers, and I look into his eyes. My heart is racing because I’m afraid he won’t say it back.

“I love you, Austin.”

Austin pulls me by the waist, pushes me against him, and kisses me. We finally break up after a long time.

“I love you too,” he says, putting his forehead on mine and breathing heavily. I feel warmth spreading through me.

“Let’s go and say sorry to Eric now,” I say with a smile. Austin lets out a loud groan.

“Way to ruin the mood. You had to take his name,” he says as he pulls away.

I laugh and say, “We need to get rid of that insecurity, Austin.” He kisses my forehead and smiles at me.

I smile and say, “You still have to say sorry.”

“Only if you keep telling me you love me, bunny. I can’t f*****g let it sink,” he says as he pulls me close.

I laugh a lot.

“Of course.”

Daisy wraps her arms around Lyra and says, “There’s my favourite bridesmaid.” Lyra smiles back at her with a big smile.

Lyra says, “Daisy, you look beautiful.” The girl looked great in the veil and white dress. It made Lyra think of her wedding. She remembers it with shining eyes.

“Thanks. But you looked better,” Daisy winks.

Lyra says in a teasing tone, “I still haven’t forgiven you for that night.”

“Oh, come on. Did you really think I’d like someone like Austin? No offence to you, honey. It was his idea to make you jealous anyway,” Daisy says. Lyra laughs at her and thinks back to the good old days.

A deep voice says, “It worked, though, didn’t it?” and both girls jump.

Austin puts his arm around Lyra and says, “You look beautiful, baby.”

Lyra blushes and looks at her husband. “You’ve told it like a hundred times today, Austin.”

Daisy laughs and says, “Oh come on, it’s been seventeen years already and you two act like newlyweds.”

“I wish my husband was as romantic as Austin. That time he showed up at the airport, Lyra, you must have been so happy,” Daisy says dreamily.

“Yes,” Lyra says. That was definitely one of the best days of her life.

“Oh, but I got slapped three times,” Austin says in a small voice, playfully, making both women laugh.

“You deserved it,” Lyra says with a wink and a smile that makes her husband feel good. Austin smiles and kisses her on the head. He knows he deserved it.

“Hey, Daisy!” a voice calls. Daisy says she’s sorry and leaves.

Lyra can feel her husband’s loving gaze. She looks at him with a look of confusion.

“What?”

“I love you.”

Lyra laughs and then wraps her hand around Austin’s neck and pulls him in for a long kiss.

“I love you too.”