



The Day Love Died

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Description: Lena Hart's existence was as near to a fantasy as real life could get, but everything changed in an instant. She is overjoyed to be pregnant and wants to tell her husband, Kellen, the news, but instead he betrays her, accuses her, and breaks her heart. Fake pictures, bad manipulation, and Kellen's growing scepticism put her in a whirlwind of pain that costs her her kid and almost her life.

Lena leaves the world she once called home with just heartache and questions. But in the depths of her misery, she finds unexpected comfort in a guy named Damien, who becomes her anchor and quiet hope. But when fate brings Ryan back into Lena's life, her childhood buddy, who is now a suspected traitor, Lena has to deal with the ghosts of her past.

As secrets come out and the truth comes to light, Lena has to decide whether to stay buried in the pain of the past or find the strength to rise, heal, and rewrite her tale.

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Lena had heard that dreaming about flowers meant that the Goddess of fertility, Hera, was sending her favors. But that was based on old stories. Christian folklore, on the other hand, linked it to Eve's weeping. It's interesting that ancient Romans would put a flower in the hands of the dead as they were buried. Last night, it was hard to tell what her dream of being surrounded by very white flowers signified.

Or maybe it was just the fact that it was her favorite flower. That should be enough of a cause for her to dream about it.

But only a few hours later, when she went to see the gynecologist for her bimonthly checkup, she got the news that she wasn't really ready for it. What the doctor told her was unexpected, but it made her heart feel like it would never stop being happy. It hit her with the same energy as a comet.

"Congratulations, Mrs. Hart. You're one week along."

It wasn't like she was dead before, but this—this seemed to make her feel more alive than ever.

She checked the time on her watch. It was still a few hours before Kellen would be home. She chose to go to her favorite place: the cherry blossom tree beside the historic Ivory Grove Sanctuary in the middle of downtown Brooklyn.

"Thanks, Jason," she said as she stepped out of the bright blue town car. She smiled at Kellen's head of security, who had been assigned to her after they got married. Kellen took several actions that appeared needless to her as he became more and more protective of her. But to preserve his heart, she didn't complain enough.

She was astonished for the second time that day when she got closer to the tree. There were several buds on the cherry blossom tree that were poking out from between the leaves and looking up at the sky. It was amazing since many in the area claimed the tree couldn't have kids. No one has seen any blooms on it in a long time. But soon, the cherry blossoms would bloom. Lena remained there for a moment, staring up at the tree with wide eyes and a mouth open in surprise. She believed that maybe the tree had gotten close to her since she had sat on the tree ring so many times.

A grin spread over her lips. The mole on her forehead showed up when her fringe shook in the gentle wind. This was one of her physical qualities that Kellen never got weary of saying how much he liked.

She sat down on the stone ring around the tree, just like she had done many times before. She took out her notepad, which was more than half full of the narrative she had been writing for a long time. The plot constantly followed the beat of her heart, which was primarily based on how she felt. But she couldn't write a thing tonight. She leaned back against the tree bark and held the notebook open on her lap, staring at the blank pages. Tears were running down her cheeks, even though she was smiling. Her tears soaked the blank sheet. The painfully exquisite pain in her heart made its way into her notebook.

Lena could hardly wait to go home as the sun started to set. She was in the backseat of the car and felt like she was going to burst with happiness. She realized that the experience of having another soul inside her body was too strong to be conveyed with words. And she wanted nothing more than to tell Kellen about this.

She walked quicker when she saw Kellen's car already parked in the driveway. Her long, wavy hair bounced over her shoulders.

She stopped at the front doors for only a second and held the test reports securely to her chest. The article verified that she was going to be a mother and that she was

expecting their first child. She and Kellen were going to have a baby very soon.

She remembered how Kellen used to exclaim how lucky they were to have gotten all they wanted without much trouble and with the help of fate.

At first, they despised each other—when Lena first started working for Zeyracorp, Kellen's firm. But after a chance encounter on the balcony, a kiss in the dark, and getting to know one other quickly, any bad sentiments they had for each other went away. They wed shortly after. Their relationship was so good that they never had to deal with more than small disputes, and even those were rare.

They had been married for about six months, and others who knew that they didn't fight much were either jealous or didn't believe them.

She had always thought she was lucky that her happy ending came to her so easily.

And now, to that beautiful life, a kid would be added, which would make it even better. Their kid.

Lena smiled to herself and brushed away a warm tear that had just slipped out from behind her eye.

She couldn't help but run up the stairs since she was so excited. The brief trip upstairs seemed like it took too long.

She knew that when she told Kellen the wonderful news, which would begin a new era in their lives, he would have the same look of enthusiasm in his eyes. She was very excited.

Lena stopped in front of their bedroom door with her pulse racing and pounding. She paused for a while, then opened the door, which produced the same screaming noise

she had been used to hearing.

She hurried in.

Kellen's towering body was standing at the window with his back to her.

"Kellen," Lena cried out, her voice full of excitement and a grin on her face.

The air in the room was tight for some reason, so much so that it felt like it was about to suffocate me. Even though the open window let in a fresh breeze, the leaves on the familiar oak branch outside shook in time with the draperies.

She moved closer and saw that his wide shoulders were firmer than normal. He stood up straight, which made his already tall figure look even taller in a scary way. His arms were as stiff as the rest of his body, and the corded muscles on his arms were always on display since his shirt sleeves were carelessly pulled up to his elbows.

Kellen turned around slowly, and Lena stopped halfway through.

Something seemed very, very wrong.

His eyes were full of rage.

His face looked crazy.

Lena, on the other hand, opted to disregard all of it. She was going to tell everyone the fantastic news that would put everything that had gone wrong right.

She moved up to him, feeling a bit frightened now.

"Kellen," she went on to say anyhow. "I have something amazing to tell you, I'm—"

“Why?” But she cut her off. “Why did you do this to me, Lena? Why?”

Her forehead was disfigured by a look of confusion. “I don’t get what you’re saying—”

Kellen shook his head and said, “No, Lena.” “I’m the one who doesn’t get it.” The skin around his eyes was getting redder and redder as his anger and what seemed like hurt grew. “Tell me, Lena, what was less in my love? Why did you do this to me? I’ve been kept in the dark this whole time.”

Her perplexity grew as she looked into his eyes, which were filled with raw anger, and his face, which was serious and definitive. “I really don’t know what I’ve done, Kellen,” she said. “Tell me.”

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“This.” He threw several pictures at her.

Lena snatched her face back as some of the photographs hit her cheek because she was upset by Kellen’s behavior. They crept down through the air and eventually settled around her feet.

He turned away from her as if she had hurt him. And Lena couldn’t help but feel her insides shake. Her instincts told her that a storm had come into her life with the goal of hurting the love she and Kellen had.

She bent down cautiously and reached out with shaking hands. When she picked up one of the pictures off the floor, she froze. Ryan, her best buddy, and she were kissing in the picture. Lena recalled this moment, but it wasn’t like this at all. The images were all expertly taken from the wrong angles, and some of them were definitely altered. But they were done so well that even Lena thought they were real.

Lena glanced up from the picture where she and Ryan were kissing and back into Kellen’s eyes. She was terrified out of her wits. The eyes that used to be full of love and affection for her were now full of hate.

And she realized that the love they used to brag about and the ideal connection they had would have to go through a test. At that moment, they were supposed to flunk the test.

It’s like believing a dream of yours is real when you don’t appreciate the good things in your life. You wake up one day and find out that it was all a dream. When the lovely dream breaks into pieces, you feel like you’re drowning in nothingness. At

some point, even the sadness that comes with that emptiness stops hurting. And your lovely past turns into a series of blurry memories that are far away.

“Kellen, trust me.” Lena was horrified and peered into Kellen’s eyes. She looked for a little bit of faith in them, but there wasn’t any.

“You want me to trust you after all this?” Kellen said, pointing to the pictures on the floor. They poisoned his heart, breaking all the vows he had ever made to her and taking away the love they thought was stronger than anything else in the world.

Lena thought she would die from the sadness she felt within. It was hard to believe that this day had come when he would accuse her of anything like that. She cried tears of pain and shock as she realized what was happening. She had never believed he would question her commitment to him or embarrass her like this in her darkest fantasies.

But she loved him with all her heart and had to make him see the truth since it was evident that someone was trying to ruin their marriage. “Kellen—” she started, but the intense anger she saw in his blue eyes, the eyes she had fallen in love with, made her take a sudden, painful breath.

He made a low groan. “Don’t you dare say my name with that dirty mouth of yours?” His eyes were full of fury. He was breathing heavily and said, “I hate you, Lena. You make me sick. Tell me how long this has been going on. Ryan was in my house last week, right? Did you fu*k in our bed too? TELL ME. Damn it!”

“What are you even thinking? How can you say...” she said, but the words became stuck in her throat. Her voice shook, and her hands shook. “I never cheated on you, Kellen. Please believe me!” she begged.

But Kellen didn’t want to hear anything.

“So, it’s all a lie, right?” He said it in a contemptuous way.

“Of course it is. Can’t you see that someone is trying to break us up and frame me?”

But who knew this trap had more to it? She frowned as she saw Kellen push the screen of his right in front of her face. His hands were shaking a bit. “And this?” he asked. “Is this a lie, too? Say you didn’t meet this jerk?”

Lena stared. Someone had gone ahead and supplied pictures of her meeting Derek Holt, Kellen’s cousin, who wasn’t on good terms with the family. Derek was also Kellen’s biggest business opponent. The guy had attempted to be mean and get Lena to assist him in killing Kellen by offering her different things.

Kellen asked, “Did you meet him or not?”

She cleaned her cheeks, and a dull pain started in her brain. She had no motive to lie because she had turned down all of Derek’s offers, so she said, “He came up to me—”

“To have you steal the secret shareholder’s file of my company, right?” he cut in. He saw the shock on her face and laughed bitterly and regretfully.

“I never betrayed you,” she added, this time with a lot of confidence.

But it didn’t help, “But that file has been missing for a week now,” he said. “And someone has been giving Zeyracorp’s shareholders great deals to buy them out. Isn’t that interesting?” His voice broke at the end as he looked away from her as if the sight of her hurt him. “I thought you would be different. I really thought that. With all the people around me betraying each other and me, I thought you would be my only light. But I was wrong.”

Her lips shook.

Could she say or do anything to show that she was innocent of all the charges he was making against her?

When someone has already made up their mind, you can't change it.

He was so far past the point of hearing Lena's urgent cries, seeing the truth in her eyes, and trusting the love they shared that nothing could penetrate his heart anymore. Lena could see it. He was so angry and hurt by being betrayed that he couldn't think straight. The love he had for Lena turned into never-ending anger.

Lena looked down at the medical paperwork she was holding. She felt too helpless and too startled to do anything. Kellen's fiery stare followed Lena's eyes, and that's when he noticed the file she was holding. He took it before she could even say anything.

Lena saw him go through the paperwork, and his jaw tightened with rage. She still had a little hope in her heart, but her head was now shouting that the things that were broken would never be fixed. It was a hurricane that wouldn't stop until everything was devastated. Kellen's face twisted in wrath that no one could imagine, and he yelled at the broken soul that stood like a statue in front of him.

"So, who is the father?" he said with a sharp tone. "Ryan or Derek?"

Her stomach dropped. And that was a natural thing to do. Her hand went up to slap his face hard.

But she gasped as he moved quickly. He grabbed her by the arms in a heartbeat, and his hold hurt so much that she moaned in anguish until it was too much for her to handle. "I want nothing more than for you to leave my life right now. Take the

bastard inside you away from me—” He growled down at her, “It hurts to look at your face anymore. It hurts to be near you anymore. You disgust me, Lena—you and every memory I have of you.”

He let go of her and pushed himself away from her body, and she staggered back. She could feel the edge of the bed strike the back of her knees. She sat back down on the mattress since she didn’t have any more energy in her legs. He gave her one final angry glance before storming out the door.

She fell into the bed, curled herself into a ball, and felt tears of pain pouring down her face. She held onto the blankets with shaking fists as if she was struggling to keep her sanity. It was too much for her to handle as her whole life fell apart in an instant. Her head hurt a lot, but her heart hurt the most. She never realized that a shattered heart could hurt so badly that it seemed like someone had stabbed her in the chest. It was too much to endure. No one should have to go through that, yet there she was, feeling it all.

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She clutched herself with both hands over her tummy to protect herself. She thought she was out of tears, but then she recalled what Kellen had said about their kid. Was his love so feeble that a few pictures could make it go away? How could he say that his own child was a bastard? Was this the Kellen she loved? Was this Kellen the same person she married?

Lena sat up on the bed and wiped her tears away hard. Her crying had stopped, and she was now hiccupping.

No—no more in this house, she thought.

His desire would come true. She was determined, and her eyes hardened. Her shaking hand rested on her stomach, where her kid was.

He doesn't have a child anymore. It's exclusively hers.

Lena packed her things right away. Their bloodshot eyes went across the room, taking in the bed, the photographs of them on the wall, and the sofa next to the balcony doors. Every single item reminded them of her and him. She had to remain and make him believe in her since she loved him so much, but it wasn't just her who was offended today. He also insulted her child in the worst way imaginable.

When Lena stepped out of the home with a bag in her hand, the huge, booming thunders made it sound like the sky was cracking apart. It was raining all the time, and it looked like the sky was sobbing with her.

She remembered that one-night last week when it was pouring precisely like this. She

had always liked the rain. She enjoyed how those small drops of good luck fell from the sky and hit the ground. She loved getting wet in the rain, so that's what she did that night. Kellen was so scared that she might get sick that he brought her inside and took care of her until she was almost crying. But suddenly, everything was different. Her spouse, the man she loved, had turned into a vengeful creature blinded by doubt.

Those pictures were definitely proof of someone's evil plans and scheme. But this test of fate showed that his love and confidence in her were weak.

The gate to the home that was no longer hers was the final thing that stood in her way to endless agony. Lena pulled it open and stepped into that eternity without Kellen. The rain concealed her tears, but the sorrow in her eyes was clear as thunder rumbled in the sky.

Jason ran up and said, "Can I drop you?"

He looked unhappy, which meant he knew what was going on. Kellen didn't lower his voice. She had a bag in her hand, and her face was red and puffy from crying. Of course, everyone could see the evidence of new damage.

"No need, Jason," she answered gently, turning away. "I don't think he would like that."

Jason worked for Kellen, after all.

Jason regrettably stepped back.

She called a taxi and got in the back seat, clutching her handbag tightly. Inside were the pictures that would destroy her. There was one final thing to do.

When fate is against you, nothing will go right. Every second that goes by makes the

task harder. At some point in life, dying feels more important than anything else. But even death won't help when you need it the most. Being alive is the worst penalty, no matter what you did.

Ryan used to live next door to Lena before she married Kellen and moved in with her parents. They had been buddies since they were kids and grew up to be best friends. Ryan helped her get out of the deep hole of sadness when she lost her parents in a car accident. She didn't know where she would have been if Ryan hadn't been there for her through the stress, sadness, and melancholy of losing both of her parents at once.

Ryan was the one buddy who never gave up on her.

A lot of their other schoolmates thought they should take their friendship to the next level, but Ryan and Lena thought it was dumb. They were more like family than friends. It was strange that the same old, foolish concept of romanticism between them suddenly made her spouse lose trust and ruined her marriage.

Lena took the pictures and headed to Ryan's house with a small glimmer of hope lingering in her heart. Lena thought Ryan would be there for her throughout this difficulty, just like he had been when her parents died.

It was possible that her relationship with Kellen would never be the same again. She might never be able to forgive him. But this dirty claim that she is an unfaithful wife could still be able to be taken back.

She thought she could establish that this wickedness and humiliation were not hers.

She didn't realize that this cursed night still had more in store for her.

She slid her fingers through the little crevice between a flower pot and the wall outside the door and pulled out the extra key.

But a few minutes later, she was standing in the doorway to Ryan's study room like a statue. She could see Ryan's back. He had shoulder-length hair put up in a macho bun, an ear pierced, and was wearing a loose t-shirt and tattered jeans. As he chatted on the phone, she could hear his loud laughing. His voice and words seemed strange to her.

"Yes, Jude. Well done!" The trace of a grin in his tone raised. "I'm glad you did everything right. Lena must be in shock right now. And Kellen, he's always been so jealous of me."

Ryan laughed so hard that he threw his head back and said, "He must be burning right now, wondering how I could do all that, all that he had the right to." He trailed off as the person on the other end probably said something, and Ryan paused for a second to nod, even though the person he was talking to couldn't see him. "That's true; I can do anything for her. Kellen, be damned, that guy always behaves like a possessive pest anyway. The photos were truly a brilliant idea!"

Lena fell back because of the smack of treachery. The cursed pictures fell from her hands as they loosened. It was funny that she was still standing because it seemed like she had no more strength left in her body.

How could she have never noticed this before?

What made Ryan sink to this level?

Was the person behind the mask she had been counting on for support and companionship the whole time an enemy?

She let out a nervous breath. Her shaky steps moved back.

After getting her bag from the front door where she had left it earlier, Lena staggered

out onto the street. She had a headache from being confused and in discomfort. It was hard to believe how her wonderful, happy life had changed course and was now heading down a road of only disaster and suffering.

In the end, the people who were the most important to her smashed her to the ground and into a bed of nails. Lena thought the anguish would never stop. She didn't know whether she would ever be able to get up again.

Ryan called Lena after chatting to Jude, a salesperson at Zeyracorp, Kellen's firm, and Lena and her good buddy. The smile was still on his lips. The person was strange and humorous, yet he was useful for both big and small things.

Ryan swore and rolled his eyes when Lena's voice told him to leave a message for the eleventh time.

He said under his breath, "Pick it up, Lena. There's no way I'm going to let Kellen wish you a happy birthday before me. Jude and I have it all planned."

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But then he grinned because he thought that the flowers and cake he had just given to her house could have already reached her. The collage of images that Jude was in charge of getting from the studio, which featured all of their high school memories, pictures of Lena's parents, and pictures from their prom night, were guaranteed to make Lena the happiest. So Kellen could go and dig a hole for himself.

Ryan laughed. He always liked to make fun of Kellen. That stubborn bull would always get jealous and angry first, and then he would give Lena all of his attention.

It was funny and sweet.

Ryan was still attempting to get in touch with Lena as he left the study.

But when he got to the door, he stumbled and stopped when his foot hit something that had been carelessly thrown on the floor. He grimaced and looked away from the phone screen.

There were a lot of images that appeared like they were spread face down.

Ryan looked around to check whether a maid or someone else was in charge of things, but he couldn't find anyone. He bent down to pick one up and was halfway through turning it over to look at it when he saw his very old and sleepy maid Agnes go by out of the corner of his eye.

Ryan's heart raced as surprise, horror, and uncertainty raced through his thoughts as he snapped his face up. He thought his eyes had actually burnt from seeing the picture of him and Lena kissing. There were also pictures of Lena with another guy,

conversing in a restaurant or standing on the side of the road. Ryan remembered that it was Derek.

What did all of them mean?

Did someone come inside his house?

He ran to the front door and saw that it was open. Someone was definitely here. He saw that the tub where he normally kept his extra key was a little out of position as he walked outside.

He frowned. He thought he had merely shown Lena the backup key. Was she here?

Without wasting any time, he went out onto the street and looked far to the left and right. But she wasn't there. He had the cursed pictures in one hand, which he had picked up in anger, and he was dialing Lena's phone with the other hand. This time, though, it wasn't to wish her a happy birthday.

Someone, somewhere, was quite happy at that moment. Her laughing boomed throughout the room, and her joy was well masked behind the walls as she tipped her head back and drank some champagne.

She stooped over and peered closely at the chessboard, and her long hair swung. With thin, well-groomed fingertips, she brutally swept the queen off the board and then, very carefully, grasped the king. She smiled lazily before kissing the king on the lips.

“Now, Kellen,” a voice like honey said, “You're mine.”

There was no cab in sight, but even if there had been, nothing would have changed for Lena. In short, she had no other place to go, at least not for the night. It was too far to walk to even the motels. After she got married, the few friends she still talked to reside outside of the city.

Lena didn't know what time it was or where she was going. Her existence had no purpose; it was the work of fate, and treachery and distrust had already set her on the path to death. Her heart hurt so much that it felt like the night sky was hazy.

It had stopped raining a time ago.

Her clothing was partially dry from the rain that had fallen earlier. The chilly wind on her skin, which was a little moist, would have made her tremble in pain, but at some point, she stopped feeling anything. Lena didn't see anything around her. She merely walked with the luggage behind her, holding it loosely with her hand. The kid in her belly was still someone she could go forward for. She knew she had to stay alive for the baby to develop inside her. That was her only hope, the one light in her dark world, and she was going to cling to it with all her strength.

People needed a reason to live, and Lena didn't have many left.

A streetlight behind her made a creepy shadow of her on the street at night.

Two men suddenly came out of a dark alley, staggering. Lena was startled as she heard their abrupt, slurry shouts. It was clear that the hooligans were drunk.

To their lusty gaze, she was just a piece of meat that chance had thrown in their way.

Lena didn't realize she was in trouble until they lurched close to her and fell over each other when they came to a stop and stared at her.

She was afraid as she took a few steps back. When she turned around to escape, someone grabbed her wrist hard. Lena shrieked at the man and tried to break away. The other man was going to jump on her, but at the last second, she pulled her hand free with all her effort. The man holding her wrist reeled forward from the rapid pull. She pushed the suitcase in front of her, making a quick barrier that the other man fell over. It was a good thing they were drunk; their motions were already shaky enough.

Lena dashed across the street without wasting a second. She didn't want to take a chance and see how long she could resist those idiots. She kept looking over her shoulder to see if they were following her when she turned her head back.

It was funny how harsh and unfair fate can be at times.

Lena didn't see the automobile speeding down the street. She heard the insane screeches of tires and saw spotlights coming at her from the corner of her eye. It all occurred so quickly that the automobile impacted the front of her body with a lot of force before she could even turn to face it or try to get out of the way.

Suddenly, she was rolling, with her body hanging in the air for a second before hitting the cold, hard pavement. The impact was so strong that it shook her bones. She heard the screeching of tires backing away from her and a pair of footfalls running away into the distance, but that was it. The ringing in her ears drowned out all other sounds. As the spotlights swiftly faded away, her peripheral vision hurt. It seemed like no one wanted to go into trouble.

She started to feel like something was tearing apart within her tummy, and it made her moan in pain. The pain didn't stop, and it didn't slow down; it only became worse and worse, stabbing, twisting, and ripping her whole body apart. Her hands were trembling, but she was able to reach her tummy and hold the skin where her kid was lying. She prayed her kid would remain, even if it seemed impossible. She was so sleepy that she thought of a lullaby. Maybe if she sang to her baby, it would settle

down. But she couldn't; her voice could only let out whimpers of anguish that raced through her whole lower abdomen. It was like getting stabbed over and over again without mercy.

"A—Kellen..." Lena said as her vision started to fade. "Please, our baby!" She begged over and over again, but no one listened. She had never felt so powerless before.

It was hard for her to breathe; her heartbeats were erratic, and her mouth was dry. He had told her that he would always protect her and that pain would never come near her. He was very eager to make her happy beyond her wildest dreams. He had stated everything in his lovely, deep voice, even the vows he made at his wedding. What happened to all of that? He forgot so much!

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Her final feeble wail resonated across the lonely streets of the night until it disappeared. The final light went out, and she was in complete darkness.

There was a lot of blood around a body that was lying motionless by the side of the road. The dawning dawn was just something that happened every day. It gently crept up and stretched across the surface of the world at a dull pace. But it couldn't do anything about the gloom that stayed eternally. A few cars drove by, but none of them stopped, not even when they saw blood and death. They cared, but they had other things that were more essential to accomplish.

The world is always busy and doesn't stop spinning for drama that isn't needed.

An automobile ceased making noise on the empty road.

A man in his mid-twenties quickly got out of the automobile. He knelt down next to Lena's bleeding body with a deep frown of astonishment and fear.

He didn't waste any time checking her pulse and sighed when he saw that she was still alive. But he worried how long she would be like this.

She was hardly breathing and had probably lost a lot of blood. The sea of scarlet that enveloped her hurt body made his mind spin a little.

He quickly took out his phone and called for an ambulance. While reaching down and whispering in her ear in a calm but panicked voice, "Hold on there, I've got you," he told her to hold on.

Kellen got home the next day at about noon, and as soon as he entered the front door, his frightened mother ran up to him. Kellen didn't want to talk to anyone right now; he simply wanted to be by himself. He was so hurt by the betrayal of the lady he loved the most that he was afraid he would cry if he tried to talk.

But his mother, who was always there for him, Celeste, followed him up the stairs even though he was dragging his feet.

"Please just tell me what's going on, Kellen," Celeste begged. "What did your security tell me? Lena left with a suitcase last night, and you were out all night, too. What the hell is going on?"

As soon as Lena's name was said, hatred boiled through every vein in his body. Kellen turned to look at Celeste. "She's been cheating on me," he said, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. "That's what has been going on right under my nose the whole time."

Celeste couldn't believe what she heard. Kellen was her only son, and she knew how much he loved Lena from the first time he brought her home to meet her. Celeste was suspicious of the girl since she went to church a lot and knew that she regularly went to a frightening shrine. But eventually, she gave up after seeing how possessive Kellen was of his wife and how much he loved her. Oh, Lena. How could she do this to her own son? Celeste stooped down and breathed deeply. Her shaky hands gripped the banister for support.

Kellen stormed off to his room, leaving his mother in a state of shock. His gaze went straight to what was on a tiny table in the middle of his bedroom. A cake, flowers, and a collage with a lot of images of Lena. Most of the pictures had the bastard stuck to her side, which is what she had been doing all along.

What was Ryan attempting to show by delivering these to his house?

Kellen let out a painful grunt as he tossed everything off the table. Next, he kicked the table away with all his might. He panted as he looked around the bedroom. Every place had a memory of her. There were framed pictures of the two of them together from previous years on the walls. Her cheerful visage in them now made him feel bad.

Kellen was only aware of his knees hitting the floor for a short time.

“Why?” his weak voice muttered as the pain echoed in the empty room. “Why did you do this to me?”

Kellen was sitting on the chilly floor with his eyes closed, not really aware of what was going on around him. He didn’t know how long he had been like this. The sound of his bedroom door banging open brought him back to reality. It was hard for Kellen to find the energy and motivation to get up and find out what was making this noise, but he did it anyhow. And all of a sudden, he had all the energy and determination he needed. His blood boiled when he saw Ryan step in, like a primordial reaction.

“How could you believe some freaking pictures of your wife? How could you do this to Lena?” Ryan shouted.

Kellen came at Ryan with an angry roar and threw a fist at his face. “Don’t you dare open your f*****g mouth here and defend that whore,” he said, but Ryan hit him in the face before he could finish.

Kellen fell back, and before he could get back up, Ryan grabbed his collar and brought his knee up to punch him in the stomach.

Ryan exclaimed, “You have no idea how much you will regret it, you freak!” as he pushed Kellen back, who fell to the ground.

Kellen stood up straight and said, “You would regret it if you stayed another minute in my house.” He picked up his phone and called the stupid guard who had let Ryan in. He was going to terminate him right away.

Ryan shook his head in astonishment, took a deep breath to calm down, and tried one final time to make Kellen’s brain work. “You’re making a big mistake, Kellen. Lena and I are not having an affair.”

“Really?” Kellen remarked with a sour laugh. “Or have you gotten tired of her? Now that she’s living with you after being kicked out of my house, do you suddenly realize that the fun is over?”

“Please, she’s not at my house!”

“Is that so?” Kellen said right away, making fun of him.

Ryan stepped back, his face twisted into a deep frown of anger and anguish. It was clear that Kellen wasn’t going to trust whatever he said. The jerk had lost his mind. “Listen to me, Kellen. One day, you will regret everything you did. You will understand what you did. And nothing you do then will be enough to get back what you threw away.”

Ryan walked out of the home as quickly as he came in, without even looking at the pathetic excuse for a man standing behind him in rigid rage. He made up his mind to find Lena, and he hardened his heart. Ryan sent a silent prayer to the angels as he drove his car onto the street, begging them to keep Lena safe wherever she was at the time.

There was only one person in the hospital lobby: an old man with a lot of wrinkles who was sleeping on one of the lined-up chairs in front of the scary metal doors to the operating room. His head was tilted to one side, which made him look uncomfortable.

Damien Cole glanced at the guy without really thinking about it. He could feel the sadness of this location settling in, and it may have been the same emotion that many others had experienced here before him: waiting, praying, and worrying about what would happen next.

The doctor finally came out in his scrubs, with lines on his forehead. Damien walked right up to him.

“Mr. Cole, her condition is very bad. She had a miscarriage, lost a lot of blood, and—” the doctor paused for a while.

Damien took a step forward in worry. For a moment, his eyes flashed to the doors behind which he knew the unknown woman was fighting for her life. “And?” he pushed the doctor to say more.

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The doctor let out a sigh. “We’re not sure yet, but there seems to be something wrong with your wife’s blood sample.”

“What does that mean?” Damien said with a grimace.

The doctor said, “We think you might have a disease, but we need to do more tests to be sure.” “I’m afraid this is a lot more complicated than just a car accident.”

Damien remarked, “But she’ll be okay, right?”

“Mr. Cole, let’s just pray and hope for the best.”

Damien felt the answer sounded quite gloomy and disheartening, and his scowl deepened.

He saw the doctor go back behind the doors of the operating room. Damien sighed and ran a hand through his unruly hair before slumping back into the chair behind him. The elderly man was still sleeping, not aware of what was going on around him. He was also snoring after saying something that didn’t make sense. Damien barely stared at the guy for a second before turning his attention back to the doors of the operating room. His mind was racing with thoughts of this woman he didn’t know anything about, but he had told her he was her husband to make sure there were no delays or legal problems with her treatment.

He felt bad about the state he had discovered her in. He blinked and closed his eyes, and behind them, he saw the memory of all the blood and her pale face. He thought about if she had a family or someone who cared about her and could be looking for

her. He was upset because he thought about how she would feel when she woke up and heard that she had lost her kid. The doctor was also talking about this sickness.

But that's only if she wakes up.

Kellen's whole body shook with rage.

He never really liked the way Lena and Ryan were friends. He couldn't help but be jealous of how close they were to each other. He never said anything about it, at least not in words, but the feeling of worry never went away. Kellen hated that his wife was so close to this other man who wasn't him. But he never made a big issue out of it, keeping his doubts firmly in check.

But now that he has seen the clear proof of the evil thing that has been going on right beneath his nose all this time, he finally lost it. The idea of Ryan caressing Lena in ways that only he had the authority to drove him crazy.

Kellen drank a couple more shots, and the liquor burned as it went down his throat. It had been an entire day since Lena departed. With his crushed heart, an entire day felt like an eternity. Every second of being alone and knowing she was cheating on him hurt like deadly thorns all over his body. And he was bleeding deep down.

He didn't want to go back to the house where he saw Lena's ghost, no matter which direction he looked. It stung so much to find out that all of the happy memories they had together in that house since their wedding were falsehoods.

Her love was a lie.

A soft palm covered his rough, trembling fingers, which were holding another shot in its vice grasp. Kellen raised his blood-red eyes to find Selene's frightened gaze looking at him with pity.

“Stop, Kellen,” Selene said with a sigh. She shook her head, and her long hair fell out of her delicate bun. She didn’t appear to know how her hair had gotten free. “You’re killing yourself! Forget about her; she’s not worth your time. Please don’t waste yourself on her. If you think of me as your friend,” she said. “You would stop this craziness right now.”

Kellen drank the harsh drink and slammed the glass down, ignoring her. The loud bass music in the background made his scalp throb in a dull agony, and he could see that things were progressively turning fuzzy in front of him.

“I... hate her,” he said, his eyes streaming.

Selene’s smooth fingers kept covering his. “You should.” She spoke in a soft whisper. She may have said more, but Kellen wasn’t paying any attention to what was going on around him anymore.

Kellen knew that Selene was holding him up as he walked out of the club on shaky legs. He recalled getting into a car and then going inside a house that wasn’t his. He felt the soft sheets on his chilly, exposed flesh and then the warmth of a woman’s body moving over him. He welcomed it; it was a wonderful diversion.

But as his quick pants of breath finally slowed down, he whispered into her long, silky hair, “Lena—”

Selene’s hand stroked his ribs till her palm protectively rested above his racing heart. The frown that formed on her lips as she heard Lena’s name quickly turned into a confident smile. She moaned and moved in closer to his ear. She assured, “Don’t worry, Kellen. I’ll make you forget her soon.”

Is it still pouring outside?

Lena couldn't open her eyes no matter how hard she tried, but she could hear the sound of pitter-patter against a glass window far away. She could also smell the unique fragrance of dirt that only came out when it rained. It was much like that day in the rear of the shrine, under the cherry blossom tree, when she first noticed him standing in the distance. He seemed so gorgeous that day—handsome and chilly.

Kellen!

But now it was scary for her to think about why it was so dark around.

Why can't I see?

Then a voice murmured from someplace, "You've lost him." No, not just him. She's lost everything.

A thick, black wave of negativity hit her spirit, and a crushing sadness sank inside. She attempted to hold onto something—anything—out of the blackness, but she couldn't reach anything at all. Her whole body jerked. The horrible feeling started to tear her life in half. Her eyelids flickered but never opened, and a tear fell from the corner of her eye.

There was a loud, frantic beeping sound throughout the room.

Damien sprang up from the couch, where he was about to fall asleep outside the I.C.U. Room.

He was worried and confused as he watched a number of physicians and nurses go through the glass doors. That's when he saw the woman's corpse, which appeared like it was having a seizure. He could see her face twist in misery through the glass.

He closed his eyes and turned away, not being able to see anymore. It seemed like fate was set on making this poor woman suffer, no matter who she was.

Kellen shoved Selene's hand away as it slowly slid down his chest and into the south. "Selene," he said with a sigh as he moved to the other side of the couch. "You said there was something important you wanted to talk to me about?"

Selene let out a frustrated sigh. "It's your dad. He wants to talk to you."

"About what?"

Selene took a moment to think about what to say. "Business, and about us. He read what the tabloids wrote about us last week.

Kellen swiped a palm over his face to get rid of the frustration he was feeling. "Selene—

She cut in with a big breath and rose up from the couch, then moved to stand between Kellen's legs in a sexy way.

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“Why don’t you ever stay with me at night, Kellen?” she said in a low voice. “You already took me that night, so why are you so far away now?”

Kellen watched as Selene shook off the silk robe she had been wearing. It fell over her shoulder. Her n**e figure was on full show, with her exposed breasts rising and falling in anticipation. She was definitely every man’s wet fantasy. But the image made Kellen cringe within. In his mind, he started to compare Selene’s proud features to Lena’s curving ones again. He clenched his teeth because he was unhappy.

He added, “Selene, I was drunk that night.” “We decided to stay friends after that.”

Selene almost yelled in anger, “I don’t understand because you said you needed some time.” “Why the hell do you still want that cheating bitch?”

“Stop being silly. I’m not missing anyone,” Kellen said as he turned aside to straighten his coat. His thoughts shouted that he was a huge giant lie. He yelled out Lena’s name in the heat of love that night because he thought of her. And it wasn’t like he hadn’t tried to get over his unfaithful wife; it wasn’t like he hadn’t attempted to find something to do with his body when Lena’s actual face was revealed. But up until now, he had been doing really poorly. He could only think about Lena, the woman he wanted, and then he would back off every time he attempted to be close to Selene. No matter how hard she tried to change his mind, he didn’t like the notion of sleeping with Selene.

Because of this, Selene and his business stayed restricted to that one night of drinking. Selene had told Kellen that she wanted to start a relationship with him, but he had asked for some time. And now the media was following them. It was hot and

happening—the breaking news that a famous supermodel and a business magnet were having an affair while the business magnet’s wife vanished from the picture.

He didn’t care what people said about him. He was so angry that he was still allowing his cheating, backstabbing wife to dominate him.

“Hey, I’m leaving tomorrow. I’ll talk to your dad when I get back from Velden.” Kellen sprang up when Selene finally backed off a little. “I have to go now; my flight is very early in the morning.”

He moved across the living area to the front doors, ready to leave her flat. But Selene beckoned him from behind in a panic, though she sounded a little calmer now. Kellen was glad to see her wearing her silk robe again as he looked back.

“He’s going to Velden on a tour too, you know.”

“Then tell him to call me when he gets there so we can have a meeting or something.”

Selene probably looked at him. “Please call me every day.”

Kellen nodded yes, and when Selene moved up to him and got on her tiptoes to give him a sweet kiss, he didn’t stop her, but he did step back politely as the kiss was going to get more serious. After that, he quickly left her house. He pressed two fingers to his temple and climbed into his automobile. The vein under his fingertips throbbed, which meant that a headache was coming on.

Jason, who was in charge of his security crew and often drove him about, had gone on a long trip. The moron has been acting sad for no reason for a time now. His strange behavior started the night Lena departed, which is strange. Kellen was so angry that he wanted to terminate the idiot who was probably on the side of that cheating, lying lady. He had just sent him on a long vacation, but he went right away

like Kellen had the plague in his house and needed to get away from it as soon as possible.

Now, he knew that he hadn't driven his own automobile in a long time. He didn't recruit anyone to take Jason's place, though, either temporarily or permanently. He just wanted to be alone himself as often as he could.

He made the mistake of looking up at Selene's apartment window while pushing the car out to the street. He saw her standing behind the glass. The robe had slipped down one of her shoulders, and he could see the top of her b****t.

Now show the whole world, huh?

He still remembered the nights he had spent with Selene before he took over Zeyracorp. They both knew that their relationship would start and finish in bed, which was precisely how he wanted it. Selene pushed him to start dating, and he did, but like all of his prior relationships, he stopped it quickly. Selene was still a wonderful friend, but they were only friends and nothing more. But until Lena came along, it was simple to spend time with her, whether it was in bed or as a friend. But it seemed like it was impossible to get back that way anymore, no matter how hard he tried.

After Lena, he was wrecked.

Lena... Lena... Lena!

He was so angry with himself that he smacked the steering wheel hard, which made the car slip a bit out of control and shriek when he clutched the wheel again. How long would it take for him to get her out of his brain and heart?

Velden.

The city was really gloomy right now since the sky was cloudy and there was no moon.

As always, Lena had an indifferent evening. She leaned against the window frame and stared out at the darkening sky. She felt the same way inside. She could feel herself fading away in the thick, dark stuff of never-ending anguish that now covered much of her heart.

She jumped as a warm hand brushed her cheek, and only then did she realize she had been sobbing.

Damien frowned and walked up to Lena. “What is this?” he said. “You’re crying again. It’s not worth it to cry over your husband, who is a fool, and refusing to get back up again won’t bring back what you’ve lost.”

Lena turned away from Damien, muffling a sob and looking for something she couldn’t see in the dark. “You’re right, Damien. There’s nothing that can bring back what we’ve lost.”

Damien had never lost a kid before, but from where he was now, seeing Lena’s pain when she woke up in the hospital, he could tell that it was definitely worse than being choked to death. He saw her getting more and more depressed every day for months. He was the one who stood by her bed and listened to her cry for death in a fit of rage. But he was glad to see her calm down after a few days. He loved to think that his friendship might help her get out of the deepest pit. He was on the edge of his seat, hoping that she would discover something in that place that would help her get her act together and move on from the past.

“You need to move on,” he said, putting a soothing hand on her shoulder. “I know you can’t forget the past or let go of everything that happened but don’t let it destroy you. Don’t destroy yourself, Lena.”

“Sometimes...” Lena let out a weak breath, and her chest hurt as it always did. “Sometimes I think it would have been better if you hadn’t saved me. I would have been with my child somewhere, and it wouldn’t hurt like this.” She held her heart over her shawl, which was thick wool that hid her thin frame and pale skin. The deep, scarlet color of the fabric made her neck stand out.

When she said it, Damien felt his chest clench. And for the millionth time, he wanted to meet her spouse so he could kill him with his bare hands. But no matter how he felt inside, he always kept it all up for Lena’s sake.

“But Lena, I don’t get it. How could it have been better for my store?” he said to lighten the mood. “After all, my stores are doing great now that I saved you and made you my business partner.”

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He sighed loudly when she didn't even smile. "Oh, man! At least pretend to smile," he said.

"Your jokes are as sad as you are, Damien," she said, sniffing.

After hearing Lena say one night that she used to write and that writing was one of the things she loved most, he looked over the notebook he had given her months before. He thought that writing would help her get over what she had been through, so he hurried to a store and purchased her a nice notebook and a pen right away. Sadly, it stayed empty for days until one day, she eventually took up the pen. He opened the journal quietly on a cloudy morning. But after reading the one page she had written in her beautiful handwriting, he didn't know if he should be happy that she was finally doing what she loved or cry because the words showed how much pain she was in.

Damien held Lena and breathed out, hoping to take some of her agony away. "Your baby would hate to see you crying like this, no matter where they are right now."

"I know." Lena shook in his arms, and her throat felt like it was closing up. Damien could see she was getting herself together by the way her shoulders straightened and the long, quivering breath she took.

She was suppressing all the agony and battling them until she was too tired to resist anymore.

The open window let in a very chilly wind that made her shudder. The wind made her hair dance, which showed a deep scar. It started at the edge of her jaw and made a

long line that went down her neck and vanished. This scar was one of the things that reminded her of that night. There were a lot more of them, but they were buried deep in her heart, still bleeding, still suffering, and very much permanent.

Kellen didn't get stiff with worry on his journey back to his flat because the road was congested or because his flight was delayed and his first appointment with the possible purchasers was pushed back.

It was how he felt in his chest.

The instant he stepped out of the airport and into this little but beautiful city, the breeze around him seemed filled with power.

Velden.

He could only think of the one person he didn't want to when he looked at the city's splendor.

Lena.

She loved nature and would have liked to relax by the various lakes and parks he saw while traveling.

His hands tightened.

A memory came before his eyes: Lena in the passenger seat with a calm grin on her lips, one of her hands stretched out the rolled-down window. She had closed her eyes for a minute as if attempting to take in the moment's essence. She looked so heavenly. He was enchanted by her.

Kellen grumbled and shook his head. He was thinking about her again, but the

memory faded, and bitter ones took its place. He quickly pulled up his window and chased her away. He chanted over and over in his head like a bleeding spell, reminding himself of how terrible she was, how she had cheated on him, and how she had betrayed him. So far, it has just made him more angry. Every day, this pain inside him would only get worse and worse. The goal of forgetting her was nothing near being reached.

Standing against a tsunami and yet being alive is like forgetting love.

Kellen felt like he was on fire, and nothing could stop this hellfire inside him until he was dead.

His phone rang out of the blue, waking him up from the black depths of his imagination. He raked one hand through his hair in annoyance after quickly looking at the name on the screen. He was trying to forget someone, but this woman kept contacting him all the time, which made him quite angry. It was hard to deal with Selene's moaning and nagging while trying to be friends with her.

At first, he thought Selene would help him forget Lena. But he always ended up comparing the two when he was with her. And now, after that one night of drinking and being stupid with her, the tabloids were following his love life, and her father wanted to see him for some reason. Kellen was just one inch away from doing something really bad. He didn't even worry about what would happen as a result of those dramatic acts these days.

He had lost his mind and didn't care anymore.

It may be because he felt dead within every second.

He knew he was colder than he had been before Lena. It was nearly too much to handle.

He was used to being hurt by the games and lies of everyone around him. But Lena made that pain too much to bear. He should have known better. She had blinded him with her kindness, hopes, aspirations, and brightness, but he should have realized that no one in the real world was so innocent. There was gloom in everyone. His parents had, as they cheated on each other and split up not long after.

Lena was the same. Finally, it was proven. And with that, the single thing that made him happy was suddenly gone.

He loathed everything and everyone in his life at that point. He was like a black hole, and all the hate and pain took over his life.

Lena scooped up the complete pile by folding the next cardigan and placing it on top of the others. Now, it was so big that it blocked most of her vision, making it hard for her to see where she was going. Lena didn't really mind that, though. She was quite familiar with every part of the store. She could even go around here and perform all the jobs without looking.

But there was only one thing that made it hard for her to stroll about without seeing: the angry shop manager, Lola.

Lola, the human bulldozer, was the most clumsy person ever.

Lena screamed in amazement, "Aaaaahhh..." when Lola dashed into her out of nowhere. All of the cardigans she was holding flew away in separate directions.

Lola was also screaming as they both fell into a rack, and the handbags that were on it fell down around them and hit them on the heads.

“What the hell, Lola?” Lena said as she pushed herself up to sit up.

Lola probably was struck too severely. She sat up next to Lena on the tiled floor and groaned in pain. “Oh, Lena, I think that new purse is made of rock.”

Lena rolled her eyes. She couldn’t help but smile. “I would have told you to be careful where you were going,” she remarked, rising up and looking about at the chaos of cardigans and handbags on the floor. “But since I’ve already told you that a few hundred times, I would just ignore the whole thing.”

After moaning some more, Lola sighed and climbed in to help Lena gather everything up and put it back in its proper place. “I have this gut feeling, Lena, that someone put a voodoo spell on me. Otherwise, why do I keep tripping over things, running into people, and making things fly around? Do you get what I’m saying?”

Lena grinned and rolled her eyes again.

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These two were still there, even though all the other personnel had gone home for the night. Lena, who was the manager and business partner, and Lola, who was the shop manager, nearly always had to remain late to close the store.

Lena and Lola were walking out of the front gates an hour after the account had already closed. They had put everything back in its place. They stopped in their tracks as they saw Damien sprinting towards them with a big smile.

“Hey, girls,” he said with a grin on his face that made it look like he was eating garbage.

Lena and Lola both raised their eyebrows at it.

“Wow! Did you win the lottery or get one of those coupons that let people go to Honolulu for two holidays?” Lola said with a laugh.

Damien’s face wrinkled up. “No, but it’s something very similar.”

Lena’s face quickly lit up when she saw how happy Damien was. “Ah huh, and what is that?” she said.

Damien gave a wink. “For now, I’d just like to celebrate it with you two over a gallon of ice cream and tell you all about it when the deal is done.”

“So this is a new deal?” Lena chuckled when Damien nearly pulled the two women by their arms to his car on the curb in excitement.

“The biggest one in the short history of my business. If the meeting tomorrow goes well, I will buy from them. And no, I’m not going to tell you the name of the company. I want to see the surprise on your pretty faces and laugh at that,” Damien said as he unlocked his car.

Lena silently asked God to give Damien everything he sought. He saved her in more than one way. He had been a buddy she could count on no matter what. Lena was shocked at how enormous and loving his heart was. These days, it was hard to find someone like this, and she was glad she met him.

Damien, Lola, and a few other people like them made Lena believe in the pleasure and goodness of the world, even while it was full of anguish and pain. Because the gods knew she needed them more than the air she breathed. Even though her heart was crushed, it was still soaking up the brightness that came from these precious gems in her life.

Lena strolled in wearing a white blouse and a long satin skirt that was comfy. She could see it was a busy day. It looked like everyone in the city was shopping. In any case, that was excellent for business. Damien’s smart style of handling his small firm was truly amazing, and Lena knew that this person would soon be at the head of this queue. His kind personality, compassionate heart, and logical intellect were the keys to his success.

Even though the staff was busy with customers, they all looked at Lena and smiled or said hi.

Lena grinned and let out a sigh. She treated them like family now that they were hers. And it seemed like all of her hard work was being rewarded with a lot of love as well.

She had lost a lot in life, but now she had so much more. She felt like a new person now, except for the nights when she was alone. Thanks to Damien.

Lola pushed her way into the little office at the rear of the store, which had three desks crammed into a tight area. Lena, Lola, and Damien could use it anytime they required it for work. Damien has plans to add more room and build separate cottages shortly.

“Lena!” Lola screamed.

Lena looked up from the desk with a perplexed smile after putting her tote bag there. Lola was a total drama queen.

“What is it now?” she enquired in a calm voice.

“Where the heck is your phone?”

Lena said, “In my bag.” “Why?”

Lola rolled her eyes. “Damien wants you to check it,” said Lola. Lena didn’t see that Lola had her own phone in her now-raised hand until Lola pointed it out. And by the looks of it, Damien was on the phone and presumably not in a good mood.

Lena arched an eyebrow, but then she unlocked the zipper on her bag and pulled out her phone and a bunch of other items. Seeing thirteen missed calls from Damien made her gasp.

Selene gave Lena her phone without saying a word but with a smug smirk. Lena bit her lip, took the phone, and pushed it to her ear. She then put her own phone down on the desk.

Lena said, “My phone has been vibrating.” “By accident.”

Damien said from the other side, “I’ve been worried sick, Lena!” Then he remarked

in a calmer voice, “I thought something had happened to you.”

“You were worried for no reason.”

Damien snorted, “No reason?” Damien stopped and groaned after a minute. “What about when you passed out in front of your apartment? Or when you had a bad headache and blanked out and sat like a statue next to a trash can for four hours? Or the time on the street when...” “At this rate, Lena, you’ll have to move back into my flat. I know you want to be independent, but this is for your own good.”

There were moments when she didn’t understand why Damien was so worried about her. Kellen did, too, but then his envy and lack of trust took over.

Lena shook her head angrily. No! She wasn’t going to go back there. Her pain was about to hit her in the dark of night. Not just now, not when she could s**k up all the sunlight she needed from the days she could.

“Damien,” she murmured in a calm voice. “If something were to happen to me, like death or whatever, it could have happened by now already. You know that, don’t you? I’m still alive and running fine,” she said with a smirk.

But not her child! How could she still be alive and that innocent young soul who she never got to know would not be?

Damien yelled, “I’m freaking serious!” “I’m coming over there, and we’re going to talk about this.”

Lena let out a frustrated groan. “No, we’re not. Damien, you need to get ready for your meeting with that new company whose name you wouldn’t even tell me.”

Damien answered, “That’s because I want to surprise you girls.” “Are you changing

the subject, you smartass?”

Lena grinned. “See you later, Damien.”

Damien let out a sigh of defeat. “Just keep the ringtone going, okay? I can’t afford to lose my manager and partner at this point in my career,” he said.

Lena glanced around after hanging up the phone and stumbled back in disbelief. Lola stood right in front of her, frowning like a ghost out for revenge.

Lena gasped and held her heart. “Shit, Lola!” “Are you trying to kill me?”

Lola waved some papers in front of Lena’s face. Lola said, “If I show this to Damien, he’ll have a heart attack and rip all your hair off.” “Your doctor has an appointment with you tonight! You have to go through these strange tests where they’ll rip your body apart, and you didn’t even think to tell anyone!”

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Lena's face became white. "You're not going to tell Damien because he's going to the meeting. And no one is going to rip my body apart. These are just tests—some regular ones the doctor wants to run on me, and not surgery or anything. So please calm down."

"But Damien will kill everyone with a saw blade when he finds out you hid it from him. If he finds out I had anything to do with this horrible plot, he'll choke me to death with one of the new Cashmere scarfs."

Lola really understood how to make everything sound worse than it was.

"I'll take care of him, Lola, and he won't know you were involved in this plot," Lena said, trying to hide the smile that was wanting to burst out on her lips.

"Cross your heart," Lola said quite seriously.

Lena was confused, but Lola wouldn't take no for an answer. Lena promised to keep her word, and Lola started to depart. But then she turned around and poked Lena in the collarbone with her finger, making her flinch. "I'm going with you," she said. "You need to hold my hand when they rip you apart."

Lola exited, and Lena sat down in the chair behind her desk.

What would she have done without these two buddies who are impossible?

She smiled and opened the first file from the stack of papers and folders. She threw herself into her job and forgot about the knots in her mind where sad thoughts were

stuck.

Like usual, the pounding pain in her head told her it was there. Thank goodness she was getting very good at ignoring it these days.

It took three lengthy hours to finish all of the tests. Lena and Lola ended up waiting for their examinations in different parts of the hospital. And at the end, Lena really felt like she was ripped apart from head to toe.

Lola was correct.

The reports were to be picked up three days later, as there was a weekend in between.

Lola told Lena on the way out of the hospital that “Damien would want to come along to get the reports and ask the doctor.”

“I bet he would,” Lena said.

Damien called her when they were walking down the corridor. He could tell when people were talking about him. Telepathy.

Lena answered the phone after asking Lola to grab the car from the parking lot and gave her the keys.

Damien shouted, “Lena!” and she flinched. She grinned since she had never heard him that excited before. “The deal’s done! I’ve got that cocky bastard wrapped around my finger. Just wait and see—our business is going to the top now.”

Lena smiled. “Congratulations, Damien! I’m so happy for you.”

“This means,” Damien said. “I’m taking you girls out to dinner. Where are you? I can hear noises, so you’re not home?”

Lena sighed in her mind. She didn’t want to lie to him, but he was so joyful that he would start to worry if she told him about the tests. But damn! She wouldn’t lie to Damien.

“Actually, Damien—” she was about to tell him right now, but someone shoved him rather hard on the shoulder as they walked past.

“Ah—hey—” Lena exclaimed as her body involuntarily turned around, and her phone tumbled on the floor. She saw the battery pop out and hoped the gadget would operate. She had saved up some money and bought the phone last month.

“Where are your freaking eyes?” Lena picked up her phone and the battery that had come loose from it and straightened up from her knees. When she saw the face of the person she had bumped into, her words died off.

She was shocked all over. Memories sprang to the front of her thoughts.

“Ryan!” she said in surprise.

When we least expect it, the past has strange ways of coming back to us. It’s like a shadow that follows us around.

“Ryan...” Lena stammered in amazement.

The memories of that night came flooding back to her, waking up from the part of her mind where they had been hidden and causing so much anguish. She remembered everything Ryan had said on the phone that night. His treachery was one of many scars that she would never be able to forget.

Ryan's face showed a lot of different feelings. He was thrilled to see his buddy after a long time, but at the same time, he felt bad for her and thought about all the things she could have gone through.

"God!" Ryan said, his voice full of passion as if a ball of it had been stuck in his throat forever. Lena... you... "Oh my God, Lena..." he said, holding her cheek in both happiness and anxiety.

Lena was pulled back into the present when she heard his words. She fired back, pushing his hand away and getting ready to go, but Ryan quickly seized her wrist.

He could finally relax now that his quest was done. He had located her closest friend. "Where the hell were you, Lena?" he said with a grin of relief on his lips. I looked for you everywhere! Are you okay? Where are you going to sleep? He had just started, and there were a lot of questions. But most of them got answered automatically as he looked into her eyes. Those soulful eyes had lost their lives in them and had dark circles around them. Her pale face and weight loss screamed that she was not fine. She looked broken but still somehow hanging on by a thread.

Lena chuckled in a cynical way, and her voice was so frigid that it sent chills down my spine.

Ryan's heart hurt a lot.

"After what you've done to me, you want an answer?" "Lena hissed."

Ryan shook his head angrily. "Lena..."

"Don't." She interrupted, her voice breaking with sorrow. "It's still hard for me to understand that my closest friend wrecked me. You turned me into a harlot in his eyes with just a few changed pictures! Ryan, this was so easy. "Well, congratulations on

that.” Lena broke up, and tears streamed down her cheeks. “How could you... Ryan, how could you go so low? “

“I didn’t!” Ryan clenched his teeth and clenched his fists in despair. “Trust me, Lena.” That night... You just heard bits and pieces, and it’s evident that you got it wrong. Lena, I had nothing to do with the pictures. You have to believe me on this! “

“Maybe you’re correct. “Maybe,” Lena said between tears. “But how would that change what has already happened?” It was easy to hear the truth in his speech and see it in his eyes, but so much had already been lost that the truth didn’t matter anymore.

Ryan’s eyes were filling with tears as he saw Lena in such a weak state. He wanted his buddy back and prayed she wasn’t lost to him.

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Ryan grasped Lena's shoulders in another frantic attempt to calm her down. "I know you've been through a lot, but we can show that you..."

"Prove? "That made Lena lose it, and she pushed Ryan away hard. "Can't you see it doesn't matter to me anymore? Nothing can bring back my child who has died! Nothing...!"

She laughed bitterly as she took another step back and saw Ryan freeze in place. Now the dam had broken—Lena couldn't stop. "According to Kellen, it was your bastard." My little one! "

She felt the same way she had months ago, in that hospital bed, when Damien told her the horrible news that her baby was dead. She had played there on the bed then because the drugs in her system made her unable to even thrash with the horrible sobs that came from her soul.

Ryan was still terrified. He felt like all of his ideas, intellect, and feelings had been taken away.

Ryan and Lena were so upset that they didn't hear the sound of a car screeching to a stop near them. They also missed the door slamming open and closed. It wasn't until Lola's fist hit Ryan's jaw that he snapped out of his traumatic state. Ryan's eyes were blurry with pain as he cupped his jaw and looked up at Lola, who was yelling cuss words, and quickly got Lena almost up her waist and into the car.

Ryan remained there, unable to do anything as the automobile sped away. "I will prove that we are both innocent, Lena." I'll get back at the people who hurt you by

hurting them. Kellen will regret the day he was born. I promise, Lena... "I promise."

"I assumed he did something bad to you, like molest you or take you hostage. "You're telling me now that he was the best friend who you thought had framed you until this day?" Lola exclaimed in frustration. What if he truly set you up? "

Lena was putting a bandage on Lola's injured knuckles with a blank expression. "He wasn't lying; I would have known if he had," Lena said simply. How could she not read her best friend's eyes? If she couldn't, she would be a hypocrite, just like Kellen.

Lola rolled her eyes and didn't look at her broken hand. It ached! The man had a really obstinate jaw. She hoped it cracked after she hit him, even if Lena said he was innocent. Lena was just the kind of person who saw the good in everyone.

"Then who really framed you if that Ryan man is innocent? Lola said in a confused voice.

Lena rubbed her temples and winced. She could feel another one of those killer headaches coming on, the ones that made her faint and left her with a bloody nose last night. She made sure that no one but her doctor knew about that. She didn't want to worry Damien and Lola more.

And suddenly, Damien burst into her room and shouted, "Lena!" "He yelled, and both Lena and Lola jumped in surprise.

Lola hit her hurt hand on the chair and yelled a curse at Damien. He didn't even look at her.

Damien ran up to Lena and stopped in front of her with an angry look on his face. "Tell me..." Why didn't I know about your hospital tests?

After that, he looked closely at Lena's face, and his wrath went away. "Why the hell do you look like you cried?" "he screamed.

He saw Lola's hand wrapped in a bandage and pointed at it. He cried even louder out of fear, "And why the hell is your hand bandaged?" What's happening?

Lena jumped to stop Lola from jumping on Damien and raising her good hand to hit him again. "You silly person, ask one question at a time!"

Lena felt like she could breathe again. The weight on her shoulders slowly lifted as her thoughts and heart turned to her wacky friends in the present. She smiled and sighed softly, wondering where she would have been without these two.

Kellen sat in the dark, drinking himself into a stupor with the several bottles of scotch and whiskey he owned. The light in his room was out, but the window was open. The little bit of light seeping in from outside pained his eyes.

It was almost dawn, and he still couldn't sleep, even though he had drunk a lot. The pain in his chest was still throbbing, and he could almost feel himself withering away. Maybe then he would finally be free. This life full of memories of her love and betrayal was killing him from the inside out.

His phone rang again.

Kellen didn't need to look at it to know it was Selene. All he wanted to do was sleep or, better yet, pass out from all the alcohol. But that woman kept telling him how much she loved him. It had gotten worse since he got to Velden; Selene was going crazy.

He had stopped answering her calls, and it seemed like it was time to...

Kellen grabbed his phone from the table in front of him and flung it at the wall farthest away with a snarl of rage.

At last, everything was silent. What a relief!

Lena felt like she was at the very center of heaven. Children were like heaven on earth.

She smiled as she watched the kids play in front of her. Some were toddlers, and some were older but still very cute. A group of them rushed by her with a ball, and their innocent smiles and screams filled the ache in her heart.

She was in the playground of Gwen's Home for the unfortunate children, as she was every Sunday evening.

It was close to the boutique, just a block away, next to a beautiful lake. During her beginning days when she joined Damien's boutique to restart her life, it didn't take her long to discover this ethereal place close by. Since then, she has become a permanent face around the children every weekend and sometimes more than weekends. Gwen's home became her solace, for she found her own child that she could not see among these children. Sometimes, she took a toddler to sit on her lap and showered them with kisses and affection that she would have given to her own.

She still remembers how the first day the kids tackled her on the ground and hugged her fiercely when she brought them snacks and gifts. She cried right then and there. If anyone can find heaven on earth, it can only be through the open, innocent, and trusting hearts of children. And she found hers. It took her a while to get her emotions under control so she wouldn't cry every time she came here.

She couldn't offer them a lot of money since her finances weren't great, but she did her best. The kids wanted more than money; they wanted love, and she could give

them a lot of it.

Lena turned to see a pleasant, wrinkled face next to her on the mat.

“He’s a newbie here,” Gwen said with a smile as she looked down at the little one in her arms. “He’s about five months old.”

When Lena saw the baby, her heart leaped. She extended her arms, and Gwen put the child in them. When Lena lay the kid’s head on her chest, she sighed. A grin spread over her lips as the warmth filled her spirit.

“How did we locate this sweet little one? She asked in a quiet voice, running her finger gently over the boy’s cheek, which was covered in saliva.

Gwen let out a long sigh of tiredness, and the lines on her forehead got deeper. “One of our junior sisters found him in the trash.” She was walking through the ghetto district of West Velden.

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Lena's heart was filled with rage and grief. She hugged the kid closer, and he shrieked with delight. It appeared like he liked being held this way since he had never been held like this before being thrown away so cruelly.

This is the world, the people, and the parents that toss babies away like trash.

What could be worse than this?

Lena held the baby boy in her arms until the sun went down, and the kids had to go inside. It was hard to give the boy back to Gwen, but she had to do it.

She decided she would have to come back here sooner. If she could, she would have loved to live here forever. Nothing made her feel more positive, hopeful, and faithful than Gwen's Home and the kids who lived there. It was a safe place for the kids, and it was a safe place for her, too.

Darkness spread its gloomy fingers everywhere, but she didn't want to go back to her apartment yet. Instead, she walked to the lakeside. There, a small bridge crossed the lake where it was too thin at one point. She walked over it and stood by the wooden railing, looking down at the water lilies swaying on the teal lake water as the moon shone down on her.

She didn't know how long she lasted like that.

A chilly wind rushed by her, making her shudder. For some reason, everything was quiet at that time, and she felt uncomfortable all over. It was as if someone was watching her with burning eyes that were piercing through her skin.

She turned her head to the side, and finally, her eyes met those of someone she never imagined she would see again.

No!

This can't be occurring in real life!

Kellen chewed and swallowed bite after bite of what was presented to him. It seemed like he was chewing his own teeth, which was unusual. People said that this Italian restaurant was the greatest in Velden, even if it was small and cheap.

All of it is trash!

But whatever he ate these days tasted the same. It was all terrible. He thought it was more about his loss of appetite than the food.

Kellen had to admit that the view of the lake from here was peaceful. It calmed him down a little, and it had been a long time since he felt any kind of calm. After his lonely dinner, he left the restaurant. He wanted to get in his car, go back to his apartment, and drink himself to death for the night, but instead, he started walking toward the lake.

The lamp posts on the side of the road lit up most of the lake. But he noticed that the light didn't reach the far side, where the moon was shining as much as it could. The natural light of the moonlight sparkling in and out of the clouds drew him there like a magnet. He walked slowly and aimlessly, his steps restless, until he got there.

Kellen was astonished to see a little bridge there and even more so by the slender lady standing there with her hair flowing around recklessly. He paused at the foot of the bow-shaped bridge and scowled at the tug in his heart.

A breeze passed by. He felt a shiver down his spine because he knew something big was about to happen. And it did.

The woman abruptly turned her face toward her.

Kellen stood still.

His feet, on the other hand, seemed to have a mind of their own and brought him closer to her. He stopped only a few steps away from her. A wave of pain went through her now-shiny eyes, and she stumbled back a little, but even then, her feet got tangled up and tripped over each other. He gasped when she fell back on the wooden bridge.

He reached a hand to help her up, but then he could only tuck a strand of hair behind her ear before backing away as if he had been burned.

Lena never looked at him again; her eyes didn't stay on his as they did before in shock. She sprang up and rushed away, and he couldn't even blink before she was gone.

Kellen remained there for a long time, clenching his hand and breathing loudly as a flood of emotions hit him.

Damien was really angry at Lena. He had been yelling at her for an hour straight.

He put the damp towel back on her forehead and dropped the first one into the water bowl. The vinegar smell in the water had Lena wrinkle her nose, which made him angry. He wasn't going to fall for the expressions she was making today.

“Don't look at me like that, Lena. What made you brave enough to stand like that in the rain? That too for so long! You were smeared in muck from head to toe—

“That’s a little too much, Damien!” she cut in, but she got another frown.

“You’re not a kid, Lena! You’re already not feeling well. You get a fever every now and then and those weird headaches. God knows how long we’ll have to wait for those test results.

“Just a few more days.”

“Don’t interrupt!”

“Damien, please stop!” She groaned, tired of his always making fun of her. “I told you I’m fine now.”

“You’re the damn!” Do you have any clue how concerned I was? You didn’t come to the store today, and Lola and I tried trying to call you. Thank God I chose to come to your apartment because you would have undoubtedly been standing in front of it, gazing at the rain for God knows how long—

She clamped her palm over his lips since she couldn’t think of any other way. It succeeded because the never-ending lecture stopped right away. But for some reason, his eyes also glazed over.

His eyes went from sad to loving.

She gently moved her fingers down as she felt the sudden change in the mood. She glanced away, maybe because certain things are best not to witness.

He cleared his throat in an unpleasant way.

“Lena,” he broke the stillness, his voice calm but serious. “You need to tell me what occurred because I can sense that something big has happened recently. Is that a

friend of yours? What's his name? Yes, Ryan. Did he try to get in touch with you or meet you again? Is he following you around or something? “

She shook her head no.

Damien was already at his breaking point. Telling him that Kellen was in Velden would only make him freak out again and maybe even start a war. It was best that she stayed quiet for now. Besides, it wasn't like Damien was going anywhere, so she could tell him later.

“That kind of stuff didn't happen, Damien. I don't know why, but I kind of lost myself in the rain on my trip to the store. I have always liked the rain.

And Kellen.

They met for the first time on a rainy day, and since then, her passion for the rain and for him has grown.

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She listened without paying attention as Damien went back to giving her endless lectures after checking her temperature for the umpteenth time.

She thought of Kellen and the lake again.

She shut her eyes tightly.

What was fate doing to her? There was nothing left in her that could break anymore, but the heavens had found a way to do just that by cruelly bringing him back into her life. Her instincts told her they would meet again and again until he completely destroyed what was left of her broken self.

She was restless. She had been like this ever since she ran into him by chance a few days earlier.

For most of her lonely nights, it felt like cold, clammy fingers were wrapping around her throat, making her want to curl up into a ball, run away, and hide in a corner so she wouldn't have to face him. Not because she was scared to fight him but because she would have to fight the one she loved.

But as morning broke, the resurrected beams of the sun always gave her strength and determination that seemed to come from a planet that no one else knew about. She fought like hard to keep them inside her feeble, straining hands.

She wasn't incorrect this time. She had never been.

She also knew that she would stay strong till the end. What else did she have to lose?

The next day, she got to the boutique early. She had a lot of work to do because she had missed work the day before. Damien had told her to call in ill again today, but Lena was determined to get back to work.

She had a lot of bad thoughts and dreams when she had nothing to do. She was better off being busy.

Lola came in late this morning and was all over the place. She was a sullen woman on crack from the moment she walked into the store. Her angry comments made it clear that she was in a bad mood because of a recent breakup. Lena gave her space and waited for Lola to get back to being happy. It wasn't a big deal to her; breakups and Lola were normal since Lena met her.

Lola grumbled as she led a client to the changing rooms and then stood next to Lena. "Do you know who's coming to check out our store today?"

Lena put away the expensive hats and looked up at Lola, who, by the looks of it, was starting to feel better. "Who?" "

"Damien has made a deal with the big fish."

Lena turned to face Lola entirely, quite curious. "Why don't I know it yet?"

Lena knew this agreement was really significant to Damien. It was his big break. She couldn't help but feel a bit sad that he hadn't told her yet.

"He was going yesterday," Lola said with a click of her tongue. "But seeing you kill yourself—"

Lena cut in, rolling her eyes. "I wasn't killing myself, for heaven's sake. It was just a fever, and I didn't mean to get it." I just lost—

Lola jokingly flung up her hands. “yes, yes. You got lost in the downpour! Whatever. By the way, why don’t you try writing poetry? Or maybe you already have, and I don’t know about it yet...

And the talking carried on. Lena groaned. “Lola! Please give me the name of this large fish, at least. Damien has been acting like I don’t even deserve to hear the name since I don’t take care of myself, at least according to him.

“Yeah? Was he acting like that toward you? “Don’t worry, Lena,” Lola said with a laugh. “I’ll tell ya.” Then, in a sudden burst of enthusiasm, Lola hopped on her tiptoes. “It’s Kellen Hart!” People say that his wife beat him up one night because he was cheating on her with a royal bitch. After that, his wife disappeared. People believe that Kellen Hart killed her and then buried her body in his garden. The guy seems to be a lunatic alpha male who couldn’t handle the fact that one small woman completely destroyed his ego.

Lola started unloading her bag of facts as Lena stood frozen in place. This was just her luck.

The ground beneath her feet suddenly seemed like it was spinning, and she had to grasp onto the rack next to her for support.

Lola then saw Lena’s pallid complexion and beads of perspiration on her forehead. “Oh, my God! Lena? Please don’t pass out on me now. Please. Is the fever coming back? Are you scared to hear the scary story of Kellen Hart? Lena, shit. They were probably lying in the tabloids. They do that all the time. I think Hart’s wife really did hit him, but maybe she just fled away after that. Oh my word, I need to stop talking now! “

Lola pulled Lena to the little office of the boutique by grabbing her by the shoulders. But the sound of a car coming to a screeching halt made them stop in their tracks.

Lena's eyes grew bigger, just like Lola's.

"Don't worry, Lena," Lola said as she hit Lena on the back. "Even if he really is a crazy killer and grave digger in the backyard, don't ever forget that I AM HERE, okay? You know how skilled I am at punching people in the nose, and I have a little knife hidden in my bra. All the time.

Lena didn't hear a word, Lola said. This time, the girl's endless talking didn't get her attention off of what was happening. She could feel his footsteps getting closer and closer every second. Her skin prickled, and her heart raced.

It was frustrating that she still reacted to him like she used to. She had been a fool to give someone so much power over her heart, and now, even after being apart for so long, it was impossible to get rid of him. So she remembered the last thing she had seen of him: the hatred in his eyes.

Lena took in the bad energy, the horrible taste of death, and all the darkness it brought with it as if it were a miracle. They came together and became the type of power she had never known existed. Even though it seemed like it was going to destroy her, she held on to what she had.

Damien's voice chirped behind her.

"... And here is the girl I told you about. My support, the lifeline of my stores, Lena."

Lena slowly turned around. She heard Lola say something from the sideline, but all she could think of were the lovely eyes that haunted her dreams—through the love she had once admired in them and the contempt she had memorized in them.

She let out a trembling sigh as she saw the horror on his face. The attempt seemed

disgusting. Still, she grinned at her own ruin, which made her appear so weak in front of her.

Kellen's chest felt like it was on fire. He couldn't believe she was there in front of him again.

People dubbed these “infernal interventions of fate.”

The pain that was getting worse spread to every cell in his body. It felt good, like when he saw her. He watched her smile, and for a split second, his lips twitched. That was the best he could do to smile. He saw that her smile didn't show any happiness; it showed everything else.

His fingers were clenched at his sides. He didn't want to look at her. It was too much.

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How could he still want to hold her close and love her like he used to, even though he knew she had betrayed him?

Kellen looked at the hand that Damien had hurt around Lena's shoulders as if she were one of his most prized belongings.

So, it seemed like she had worked her magic here, too. She had gotten herself another f**k-buddy.

Kellen turned away, horrified, and fought the impulse to laugh. His amused eyes quickly rested on the other lady standing next to Lena, who had her hand halfway under the neckline of her dress and was giving him a tired expression. What was wrong with these people?

Kellen remarked in a serious voice, "I'll send a team of my staff to all your stores across the city as you get the first batch of the order." He was looking straight at Damien and completely ignored Lena next to him.

He left that awful place in a rage, not even bothering to say goodbye. He didn't care what his new client thought of him for that. What mattered more was getting away from that horrible woman, even though he still loved her, and it made him sick to his stomach.

It was a bad idea for him to do the fieldwork for his new projects himself. He had just wanted to bury himself in more work to get away from Lena's thoughts that had been taking over every inch of his mind since he met her at that horrible lake. How funny that he ended up meeting her again while doing so.

He got into his car quickly. Before the car left, his eyes hopelessly drifted back to the store's front glass doors. He hated himself for wanting to see her again, but he was glad it didn't happen.

The pain was so bad that it didn't stand out anymore; it was just a part of her life. The difference was that she had been trying to move on from it until Kellen came back to what was her present. Then, she was suddenly soaking in all that she could from the pain that had always been there but had been carefully locked away.

Her armor protected her, but it also burned her hands.

She had tried to forget how much he hated her in the past, but now she couldn't stop thinking about it. This negativity kept her strong, active, and smiling.

But her stomach always hurt, her brain throbbed, and her heart grieved. She knew she had turned into a self-absorbing black hole, pulling her own soul into her gloom. She knew she couldn't get out of this process.

But thank God she was still given mercies and little breaks that kept her sane. One of them was Gwen's Home.

"Aw... You are such a sweetie! "Yes, you are," Lena cooed at the five-month-old child who was new to the group.

The boy's eyes became bigger with happy surprise as he suckled on the bottle, taking little gulps of milk while watching Lena with all his concentration.

"You've finished the whole bottle, you hungry charmer." She grinned as she took the empty bottle out of the boy's lips and set it on the table.

Mother Gwen smiled at Lena, who was sitting across the table. The other sisters and the servants were busy in the big kitchen.

Gwen remarked, "We've decided to vote on what to call him."

Lena held the kid up to her chest and patted him on the back. She smiled and said, "That would be a relief, mother." The kids and the sisters would never stop fighting if they didn't do this.

Gwen smiled and moved her spectacles to the tip of her nose. "Of course."

After a short pause, Gwen continued, "You're a natural, Lena. You would make a great mother one day."

Lena froze, and her palm slowed down for a minute on the cooing baby's back. She took a brief breath and kept it in her lungs for strength. "You know it would never be," she said, her nose pressed against the boy's small shoulder, which was covered in cotton. "I'm not capable of being a mother." That blessing was taken away from me a long time ago.

"Lena," Gwen murmured, but her grin didn't fade. "You don't have to be pregnant to be a mother."

Lena's eyes, which had been unfocused, were now focused on Gwen, who was staring back and forth between her and the baby. The baby burped loudly and then threw up all over Gwen's hair and shoulder. The sisters who witnessed it laughed from different sections of the kitchen.

Lena stayed there, though, until Gwen, who was now smiling widely, jumped up and moved around the table to assist in cleaning up the vomit. Lena then came to her senses. She grabbed the tissues that one of her sisters gave her and started wiping up

the boy's face, who then tried to devour the tissue.

"Mom," Lena said. "Can I?" Is it possible? "

Adoption. It appeared like a beacon in her dark existence.

"Yes, it is very much so. But it means going through a lot of steps and following certain important rules to make it happen. Mother gave her a look of encouragement.

Lena's eyes filled with tears, but she wasn't sure if she should dare to dream yet.

"Dave," Lena said with pride and delight.

Damien and Lola grinned as they drank tea from their elegant mugs.

Damien said, "This voting was a good idea."

"Got the kid a cute name," Lola clapped her hands with joy. "I can't wait to meet him." Oh, just the sound of his name makes me think he's going to be a big wooer when he grows up. He'll save the ultimate damsel in distress, get married, and have lovely kids of his own.

Damien rolled his eyes. "And you drank too much Chinese tea."

"That's not true!" Lola smelled the tea with disbelief. "You idiot, there's herbs in it, not alcohol."

Damien rolled his eyes again, and Lena shook her head with a smile.

Damien and Lola took Lena to a traditional Chinese restaurant since they were tired of seeing her stuck at home and at work. These days, she didn't want to go anywhere

but Gwen's Home.

Damien moved a little forward to stare at Lena across the table. "I'm very thrilled for you, Lena, that you chose to adopt... Hey, Dave. I hope they finish all the paperwork quickly so you can finally bring your kid home.

Lena smiled and couldn't help but feel hopeful. The tea she drank was calming, and the smell wasn't as strong as coffee, which made her want to sleep.

She leaned back in the chair and watched Damien and Lola argue over something.

It had been a week since she last saw Kellen in the boutique, which was their second meeting. After that day, his staff only came by to drop off the clothes and accessories he had ordered and stayed to look over the customer reviews and sales statistics with the boutique staff. It didn't take a genius to figure out that Kellen was avoiding going to the boutiques again; he didn't want to see her again.

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That was really excellent for both of them.

In the meantime, Lena had signed up to adopt Dave, and Gwen had promised that she would personally see to it that the process was done as soon as possible. If it were up to Mother Gwen alone, Lena was sure that she would have gotten Dave in a week's time, but unfortunately, that was not the case. There were rules and laws and many legal steps to undergo, especially for a young single woman like her who had just recently built up some sort of career. Moreover, it was totally unfair that couples were preferred more in these cases.

Damien left Lena off in front of her apartment after dropping Lola off later that night.

Lena got out of the car and was going to go.

"Hey, Lena," Damien called her back.

Lena glanced around and looked confused.

He said, "We're going to get your test results tomorrow night," and lines of stress appeared on his forehead.

Lena remembered the date. Yes, she had an appointment with the doctor the next day.

"You forgot, didn't you?" Damien smirked and squinted his eyes playfully.

"What else do you do besides remember everything for me?" Lena said with disdain.

“Of course, babe,” Damien said as he started the car. He moved forward and playfully kissed her cheek. Lena pushed him back, laughing, and slammed the door shut.

She saw him drive away and sighed. She turned to go inside her apartment building, but she stopped on the steps to the front gates. She saw a shadowy figure in the corner of her eyes around the corner of the building. She turned her head quickly, but the man was already walking away, his back to her.

Kellen didn't know why he was standing there in the shadows where he could see Lena's house.

Kellen convinced himself that he had found out where she was in Velden because she was still his wife and could plan ways to get money from him. He held onto that idea tightly, even though it sounded stupid to him because she hadn't shown any signs of wanting to take money from him yet.

When he saw Lena last that day in the store, her eyes were completely lifeless. The image scared him and has been troubling him ever since. It made him wonder whether he had been wrong to judge her.

But then he got angry when he saw Damien drop her off. They looked so close and free with one other. His jaw clenched. Of course, she had found a new boyfriend. And here he was, looking like a fool, thinking he could have done something wrong.

First Ryan, and now Damien! She was really happy to play with rich guys.

What else could he want from her?

He couldn't stop thinking about those horrible pictures that showed her actual self. They made his head throb, which was an indication that a headache was approaching.

Kellen turned around and ran out into the night, his thoughts full of pictures of his wife—he growled—of Lena in the most personal manner with Ryan and Damien.

He really needed a drum full of brandy tonight!

Lena took a moment to calm down and put on a blank face while she took a long, shaky breath. Then she got out of the car and looked up at the Hart's Velden branch office on level eight. It was a place to work and make money, but for her, at the moment, it was an inferno she was going to walk into willingly.

"I still have that pocket knife in my bra, Lena," Lola replied with a smug look. "Don't worry, girl."

Lena looked at her from the side. "You should take it off now and leave it in the car. The security is very tight at the front gates, and you'll be seen as a terrorist or a murderer." She pointed to the security officers who were using metal detectors to inspect individuals.

"Wow, potato! Lola screamed, "But I don't look like a terrorist or a murderer, do I?"
Hey

Lena shrugged. "I don't think they'll care how good you look if they catch you with knives and blades."

"I'd better leave my lifeline in the car," Lola mumbled as she pulled the knife out of her bra and tossed it back in the car when a man walked by and gave her a leering look.

The girls then headed to Kellen's office. Lena's worries were calmed now, and she had to appreciate the minor problem with Lola's knife for that.

Lola looked very uncomfortable now that she didn't have a weapon to protect herself and Lena from the crazy suspect, Kellen Hart. At one point, when they finally got off the elevator and reached level eight, Lola started cursing Damien for sending them to check out the sample of their next order.

Lena replied, "Damien just trusts us so much, Lola. If he didn't have that cranky Mr. Harry with him, he would have come himself."

Lola complained, "It would have been better to deal with Mr. Harry knowing I had my knife to poke his eyes out than to deal with the crazy Mr. Hart." She whispered the last part softly, worriedly, and looked at Lena's face.

As they got to the waiting room outside Kellen's office, Lena kept her eyes on the woman at the counter.

So even Lola can see it.

It seems that Lena didn't really know how to wear a mask with no expression after all.

Or maybe it was because Lola was worried. Some individuals, no matter how insane they are, have this strange ability to read waves of emotions. It's creepy and interesting at the same time.

After the secretary told them that Kellen was caught in an important meeting in the office at the last minute, they sat across the room and waited.

Minutes went into seconds. The secretary, a thin brunette, appeared like a pleasant lady who would be gracious enough to have staff bring them drinks. Lola was a happy camper, eating the cream cookies without a care in the world while reading through her phone.

But Lena was the exact opposite. Sitting still made her nerves a mess again.

We only know how hard it is to wait when we are waiting.

“I’m happy that my only daughter and you are dating, but only if you don’t do anything stupid, Hart.”

Kellen sat stiffly in his soft leather chair, which had a harsh surface with sharp needles sticking out of it. He stared at the elderly business mogul Isaac Arthur’s sneering visage across the desk.

How was he going to tell Isaac that he and Selene were not really together?

Who would have thought that his old college girlfriend would show up as a drunken one-night stand soon after his wife shattered his heart? Then she would send her father after him to make him marry her!

He had the worst luck ever!

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So far, Kellen has been good about not answering Selene's calls since he got to Velden. He even smashed his own phone against the wall to stop the calls and told his secretary not to send them to him. He had too much on his mind like Lena coming back into his life and driving him crazy day and night.

"I think, Mr. Arthur," Kellen said slowly, "there's a big misunderstanding here." There is no tie between your daughter and me. I am friends with Selene, but that's all.

Isaac Arthur's smile didn't go away, and it was deliciously curled. "The blunt and, in some cases, insulting articles in the tabloids say the opposite."

Kellen moved around in his chair, and all of a sudden, his bad sentiments about this were much worse. "You know how they always like to gossip."

Isaac Arthur raised his head and leaned back in his chair, giving Kellen a pointed look. "Gossips always start with at least a flicker of truth, Hart, no matter how small it may be." "You're not going to use and throw away my daughter whenever you feel like it," he said, his eyes shining. "She's my daughter, not your ex-wife."

Kellen jerked. "Excuse me!" He yelled,

What right did he have to say anything like that when he didn't know what had really happened? Arthur was trying to get him worked up, and he did a damn good job of it.

Arthur only laughed at Kellen's scream. "I don't keep my daughter from getting what she wants, boy; she wants you more than anything else."

“You can’t make me do anything,” Kellen said, getting angrier by the second.

“Then I can surely tear apart more than half of your family businesses,” Arthur said calmly, his face still serene. “You already know that, don’t you?”

Kellen swallowed the snarl in his throat and said, “You had a deal with my father. I still have a year.”

Arthur continued, “But the debt is big, and there are loops, according to my lawyers. You know I can ruin you.”

Kellen longed to wake up his dead father, take his place, and die right then and there. It was only fair for the person who had caused the problem to deal with it personally, not the generations that would come after him.

It was a bad day for Arthur’s father when he had to take on this huge debt after his firm lost a lot of money.

It also didn’t help that half of Hart’s enterprises were about to go out of business. People said that when his wife left, Kellen became more of an alcoholic Romeo than a good businessman.

“I can also do the opposite. My daughter is the good luck charm you need. Then, the sky will be the limit. “Think about it, Hart.”

Arthur moved quickly out of Kellen’s office, and Kellen sneered at his back as he did so. The old man had an aura of confidence and evil about him.

He took a minute to calm himself, but the stress was still boiling beneath his skin since he knew he was so close to losing most of his family enterprises.

He took a huge breath and clenched and unclenched his hands a few times before picking up the phone and telling his secretary to send in Damien, who had been waiting outside for a while.

But when he looked up, his schoolboy face instantly fell away. It was just his luck that Lena, who looked as calm as a cucumber, had to be the one to stroll in.

Lena scanned through the magazines on the tea table in front of her without thinking.

Lola complained next to her, and Lena observed Lola's face immediately turn a pale shade of green.

"Hey," Lena inquired with worry. "Are you okay?" "

"I think I ate way too many cookies," another groan emerged from Lola's tummy. Suddenly, Lola dropped the phone on top of the magazines Lena had been looking at.

Lena and Kellen's secretary, who was sitting opposite her desk, were shocked as they observed Lola dash across the room to the bathroom.

Lena prayed this didn't turn out to be a very bad stomachache. They had to leave the Hart dynasty at some time, after all.

A man in his late fifties strolled out of the office with a sneer on his face. He stopped in front of Lena and seemed surprised before his eyes glinted with anger. The elderly man stormed out, leaving Lena confused.

Who the heck is that, and what the hell is his problem with her?

But when she saw the cover of one of the business magazines, she completely forgot about the incident. Kellen's face caught her eye. Lola's phone was right next to his

face on the cover, hiding the topic underneath. Lena's hand reached out on its own and took the phone away, revealing a woman's photo next to Kellen's.

Her heart hurt, and she jumped.

Lena thought she knew that woman. As she read further, she discovered it was Selene, one of Kellen's former college flings who is now a supermodel.

So, they're back together now.

The opening few sentences of the article claimed precisely that, with spicy comments about the pair.

So, he's gone on.

Lena may have sunk into a huge hole of numbness. There was no one else there save Kellen and Selene, and their being together made her pale face look even worse.

The secretary had called for her then. Lena looked up and saw the anxiety on the secretary's face. That woke up the black hole inside her again, the mass of horror that sucked in all of her feelings.

She walked the distance to the mahogany door of his office. When she got there, Kellen's hard, staring visage confronted her.

So, the man who says she cheated on him has actually cheated on her instead.

It made her want to laugh, and it made her want to laugh so badly.

The meeting was short and awkward. Lena's nerves were on edge as she sat across the desk, catching Kellen scowling at her too many times. She thought it was

probably the blank look on her face that was making him mad. She knew him so well that she could tell he hated not knowing what she was thinking.

Lena also saw that his hair was messy; he had a week's worth of beard on his face, heavy bags under his eyes, and creases on his forehead. But shouldn't he be happy now that he's with his beautiful former fling?

But it shouldn't matter to her.

Lena grumbled to herself and stopped asking herself questions right there.

They dealt with problems with their following orders in the most professional way possible.

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Lena picked up the paperwork she had brought with her and grabbed her purse from the floor next to her chair. She was ready to get up and go when everything was quiet. She could feel his gaze burning her skin the whole time, but she refused to look.

At that point, he questioned it out of the blue, tearing off all the layers of indifference. “Where is it?” “

Her eyes sprang up to meet his inquiring ones, which were mocking.

He waved his hand in the air and said, “The baby, I mean.”

Why did he have to wound her so badly?

She let out a gentle sigh and turned her eyes away from him. She didn’t answer and walked toward the door. She had to leave before she broke down. She couldn’t let Kellen see her so vulnerable.

“Hey, I asked you something,” he said in an angry voice.

She heard him moving behind her and knew he had also risen up and was walking around the desk to get to her.

She was so angry that she forced back the tears that were pouring down her face. It hurt her head to do so.

“I’m not required to give you an answer,” she responded as casually as she could.

Kellen clucked his tongue as he got closer to her. She still didn't turn around. She knew she had to get out of there right then, but her feet felt like they were made of lead. Her soul screamed because Kellen was begging for the baby that wasn't there anymore.

"Then I think it's too soon. Nine months are still going on. Is the daddy, Ryan, still in touch? Kellen was now close behind her, and his voice was getting more and more predatory. "I saw him here in Velden, too. By the way, is he willingly sharing you with Damien?" Or are you cheating on him too? Or maybe you're bored with him and want to play with Damien instead. I heard that you had been staying in Damien's place for a while. Is he really that fantastic in bed? "

She was so angry that she turned around and slapped him hard across the face. The force of her hand hitting his cheek made his face jerk to the side.

Her shaking hand fell to her side. She panted, and for a second, the vision in front of her blurred. But this was not the time to give up, so she blinked away the blurry patterns. The next second, Kellen pushed her up against the door, his angry breaths fanning her face and his hands holding her upper arms too tightly.

"How dare you!" he yelled, sneering.

Lena winced as he tightened his grasp. "I should have done it a long time ago," she said. It was the truth, and she wanted to do much worse to this man. But would it erase everything she's gone through?

She saw that his lips were squeezed together in an unnaturally narrow line, and his brows were furrowing in the deepest frown. "You have the nerve to talk back so brazenly after cheating on me the way you did! Right in front of me! What type of a shameless whore are you? "

Lena laughed after a moment of silence. It sounded worse than crying to her own ears. By that point, Kellen's grip on her arms was hurting her, but she didn't say anything. It was nothing compared to the pain that had burned her insides like the worst forest fire.

"But aren't you cheating on me too?" "You're forgetting, Kellen, that you're still married to me," she remarked, her voice full of laughter and her eyes full of sorrow.

His face got pale, and his body relaxed a little. Lena slipped out of his arms as he let go of her.

Lena had never known it was possible to love and hate someone so much, all for one person. All of her strongest feelings had to be about this man, and there was nothing she could do about it. It was like trying to stop a planet from spinning.

She scooped up her paperwork and purse that had fallen on the floor earlier, and her whole body shook. Without wasting another second, she stormed out of Kellen's office and out of the building.

She had to go home right away.

Lola was probably still in the bathroom with her upset stomach, but Lena had reached her limit. She called a taxi, got in, and texted Lola to let her know she had left. The blurs in front of her eyes kept coming back like nightmares, and her head hurt as much as her heart did. A metallic taste grew in the back of her throat, and she choked on it.

The bad flavor made me feel ill and sweet.

Damien had been trying to call Lena for an hour with no luck. He had told her yesterday and every day before that they were going to pick up her test results, which

included blood tests, an MRI, and some X-rays, and then they were going to see her doctor right away, as he had been told to do. The worst part was that the doctor wouldn't say what they were thinking until they were sure, which made it seem like something dangerous.

Damien grunted as he shoved the phone roughly into the pocket of his blazer and grabbed the car keys. He suddenly thought of all the ways she could be sick or in danger. She was answering his calls, and even Lola had told him a while ago that Lena had left Kellen's office bathroom without telling him.

Damien was quite scared that she would be sick.

He had seen her in the worst situations and when she was healthy. He didn't want to go through those experiences again.

But fate hardly ever pays attention to what people say.

Damien was so worried that he practically flew out of his apartment. His vehicle screeched out of the driveway and onto the dark street. His home was not far from Lena's, but when things were like this, even the shortest distances felt like they were taking forever.

He got to her apartment and saw a hunched-over figure on the sidewalk. He did a double take, his eyes widened, and his foot slammed down on the break. The next thing he knew, he was running out of the car to get to the person who looked almost like they were one with the shadows of night.

"Lena! Damien croaked, "Damn it to hell," and knelt down in front of her. "What happened to you? Are you hurt? Oh my God!"

His hands shook as he tried to raise the hair that covered virtually her whole face. He

carefully held her cheeks and lifted her bent-down face. When he saw what he saw, he screamed in horror.

“Goddamn it! Lena, your nose is bleeding?”

He pulled out his handkerchief and wiped away the blood that had dripped down her nose. Her breath was coming out in short, weak pants, and Damien saw that her eyes were glazed and dazed, and her whole body was shaking. Even though she looked up at him when he kept asking her to, it was like she was looking past him.

Damien’s heart was filled with fear.

He picked her up and put her in the car, fastening her to the passenger seat. He called Lola and then drove to the hospital. He felt terrible about this, really terrible. He remembered the tests she had gone through without telling him. He remembered the time he found her in the street, drenched in rain and looking sick. But she wasn’t bleeding through her nose like that. His logical side screamed that they were about to deal with a disaster, while his emotional side hoped and prayed that nothing like that would happen.

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A flash of light burst through and turned into small, excruciating laser dots behind her closed eyelids. Lena whimpered as the dull agony in her head became greater with each passing second. It was worse than any hangover she had ever had.

She slowly opened her eyes and groaned again at the agony that was so bad it made her eyes water.

Then she felt something prickling her left arm. Something was being put into her body. Her eyes shot to the left.

A nurse who was the same age as she smiled and said, “Morning!” “The nurse said with a smile.

Lena struggled through the discomfort and raised the corners of her lips in the same way. “What... What time is it? ... What happened to me? “

“It’s seven in the morning,” the nurse said as she turned to the bedside table and started checking some tablets. “You were out cold for an entire night after we put you to sleep. You were brought in because you were bleeding from your nose and not reacting to anyone or anything. I can only tell you this: the doctor will be here in an hour, and he will be able to tell you more.

Lena nodded without thinking. She was bleeding through her nose again! It was interesting that she couldn’t recall the red event this time.

As the nurse departed, Lena checked her temperature and blood pressure. Then she saw Damien and Lola, who were both sleeping on the couch and looked very

uncomfortable. Even in sleep, their brows were furrowed, and their features were screwed up in intense worry.

She was in the hospital!

Lena sighed. She felt like she was a burden to this great couple, and it was making her feel bad. She was weary of hurting and letting them suffer because of her, but it looked like it was her fate.

Lena turned her head weakly and looked at the spotless white ceiling above. She could clearly picture how they were both probably awake by her bedside all night. The nurse might have given her some kind of drug earlier because the pain in her head was getting better quickly.

“You are awake.”

She heard Damien’s tired voice and then Lola’s scared shriek as she hilariously woke up from Damien’s thoughtless, unintentional nudge as he sprang from the couch.

Lena groaned. It was time to face the music.

But Damien and Lola’s musical scolding and freak-out session had to stop since it had just started. The doctor walked into the room with the nurse from earlier and a junior doctor behind him.

The doctor smiled and said good things to her, then inquired how she was feeling. After that, he got serious. Damien and Lola both imitated the look, and everyone knew it was time for the truth to come out.

Finally, the doctor spoke out. “Lena, you have a malignant tumor in your brain. It’s a high-grade Astrocytoma.”

You could only hear quiet gasping in the pin drop.

But Lena was troubled that she didn't care about the news of this coming tragedy when she should have. She merely shifted her face and looked out the open window, losing herself in the fragrance of pines and the chilly wind that blew on her face.

Kellen was having trouble focusing on his task.

He couldn't stop thinking about the sorrow and visceral anger he had seen in Lena's eyes.

She admitted it was true, and he hated to admit it even to himself that he had cheated on her, too. It was a mistake he made while inebriated, but it was what it was.

He was still married to Lena for crying out loud!

He was so angry that he shattered the pen in half between his fingers. He was angry with everyone in his life, including himself.

But then, all of a sudden, he started to feel something else inside him. It wasn't hatred for Lena or frustration with himself and his situation. It was much worse than that, worse than anything he had ever felt before. It was as if something very wrong was happening somewhere, something horrible. It was as if a storm was coming, and its destruction would be much worse than when Lena broke his heart. His heart was pulling at him so hard that he felt like he was losing his breath, but he didn't know how.

He had a gut feeling that something bad was going to happen, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

Queency's head slid through the slightly open door of his office. She called him three

times, but Kellen was too busy with his troubling thoughts to hear her.

“Mr. Hey, Hart! Sir.”

He looked up only when his name was practically yelled. The shattered parts of the pen cut his fingers, and he could feel the blood running down, but he had to look at it.

“I told you not to bother me for the next hour,” he said seriously from behind the desk.

Queency jumped back from the door. “I just wanted to let you know that two of our clients have canceled their appointments for today.” Oh, your hand is bleeding. Do I need to carry first aid? “

Kellen said, “No need for it.”

“Who are they?” He asked for the clients’ names, feeling angry. The firm was already going bankrupt, and in this case, people not taking work seriously was not okay. “Don’t they know it’s the weekend tomorrow? They’ll have to wait a whole day to get another appointment?” You stated that all of today’s meetings are important, right? “

“Sir, Mr. Ken just got into a car accident, and Mr. Damien is in the hospital with his business partner.”

As soon as she completed the words, Kellen felt his body tense in attention.

Damien’s partner in business.

That meant Lena?

He quickly looked up and said, “What happened to Lena?” “

He sprang up to his feet as Queency looked at him with interest.

“I don’t know. Should I get in touch with Mr. Damien and ask?” “She asked.

“No,” Kellen screamed. He was pacing back and forth in front of the tinted glass in his office that went from floor to ceiling. “Just tell me the name of the hospital they’re in and let me know right away.”

Queency’s eyebrows went up in wonder at how strange her employer acted when he heard that Damien’s business partner was in the hospital. Still, she nodded and left to do what she had been told.

Kellen, on the other hand, was pacing back and forth in his office, which was making holes in the floor. His face was twisted in a deep scowl of anxiety and terror.

He had just one idea, a basic need: he had to see her.

Now it’s bloody.

Lena sat up in bed in the hospital with a pillow behind her back. She peered out the window, feeling Damien’s unblinking gaze burning her skin.

“It’s not right.”

When Damien abruptly spoke, Lena’s gaze turned toward him. He narrowed his eyes and spoke in a stern manner. Lena furrowed her brow in confusion.

Damien went on, “The way you’re thinking is completely wrong, Lena.”

“So now you can read minds?” Lena kept a blank look, attempting to appear funny.

Damien groaned and shook his head in irritation. “It’s pretty clear since you don’t look scared at all. It’s like you don’t care that you have this deadly disease.” Am I right?”

Lena simply let out a long, trembling sigh. “It’s not like me caring will make it better.”

“Everything will be well, Lena.” Damien’s eyes filled with tears of protest. “Just know that I’m here for you, and even that crazy head Lola I saw crying behind a pillar a while ago. So, you never lose hope, do you? Just keep going. You’ll get through it, darn it! He went over to hug Lena, and she hugged him back right away. She really needed this.

It’s amazing what a simple embrace can accomplish when you feel powerless.

But she didn’t express that a big part of her wanted to sigh in relief for the disaster that was coming. That part of her wanted a break and the chance to finally let go of all her feelings and memories.

She knew that once she was diagnosed with this brain tumor, she would soon be stuck in bed with all the treatments, surgeries, chemotherapies, and medicines the doctor had told her about. Since then, she had been thinking about the possibility that her application to adopt Dave would be turned down because of this.

Dave might have been the start of something new for her. But it was probably already clear that there was no such thing as a new beginning in her fate. All she could have were bits and pieces of love, Kellen, and her lost kid, Dave.

Maybe she was intended to be unhappy in life. Shouldn’t she be grateful that God

was finally giving her an opportunity to let it all go, even if it meant dying?

Some people would say that her ideas are ill and suicidal. She, on the other hand, would like to say that they are just letting fate be.

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But then she remembered how stubborn her friends were. One was crying on her shoulder, and the other was wailing behind a pillar outside. She focused on them instead of her hungry thoughts.

“Thanks, Damien,” she said with a shaky grin and a feeble slap on his rigid back. “Thanks,” she said again in a whisper.

She had to get herself together and her pals and do something about all the crying.

He and Lola continued saving her more than just physically, and they did it every day. She would be forever grateful to these two.

Kellen stood still, looking through the oval glass at the entrance.

Pain, anger, and jealousy all came back to him. He was shocked that he could still suffer so much, even though he knew Lena’s reality and how she had betrayed him. It was far worse than the last time.

He wanted to take Damien off of Lena and kill that rascal right then and there. His fists were clenched at his sides, and the next second, he turned around and let out a painful groan.

When would his heart stop loving her? When? Because it had become torment that he could not stand any longer.

He raced down the hallway and out of the hospital, breathing heavily. He stopped in front of his vehicle in the parking lot and leaned on the sleek roof for support. His shoulders drooped in defeat.

Kellen wanted to turn around and go find the doctor to ask about Lena's health, but it was clear that Damien was taking good care of her. She didn't need him. Whatever had happened to her, whether it was a bad fever, the flu, or high blood pressure, Kellen decided to look into it indirectly and later, just like he had done with Lena's whereabouts in the city.

He didn't need to make a fool of himself anymore by demonstrating he still cared.

But didn't he already make a fool of himself by coming down here as soon as he heard she was in the hospital?

It was a mistake to come here.

But Lena is still his wife!

Kellen's wife is always in the arms of another man, and Kellen has never been bloody enough for her.

He quickly pulled his phone out of his coat pocket, which wasn't a good idea, and called his lawyer.

When the phone was answered, Kellen's eyes were crimson. It might have been pain, rage, or both. But he didn't want to figure it out. He just wanted it to be over.

"I want you to write a divorce petition," he said, his eyes watering with pain.

Ryan sat in his car a few feet away, in the same parking lot as the hospital. His eyes hardened with anger, but his lips curled into a sarcastic sneer as he observed and listened to that miserable man's stupidity.

There was no doubt that Kellen loved Lena. But love is nothing without trust.

And Ryan would make sure to tell the sad guy in great detail how accurate that was.

Ryan's phone rang, which brought him back to reality. He sighed and blinked his eyes as he raised the phone to his ear.

"Sir, it was Selene Arthur's car," a person on the other end said excitedly. "You were right about it." It was Miss. Arthur, who had hit your pal that night?

He finally had proof. Now justice was close at hand.

Ryan caught his breath. His eyes were angry and impatient. But he knew he had to be patient. The clever witch needed to be encircled on all sides so that she couldn't get away.

Lena, wait just a little bit longer.

Lola came back to Lena's room late yesterday night with a puffy face and a set of eyes that were a little red. She cried again when she saw Lena, and Lena hugged her like a bear. Damien jumped in right away and made it a group embrace.

The three of them comforted each other through the night, feeling the terrifying jolts of the storm they were confronting in their bones.

When dawn came and the doctor came back, Lena was finally told she could leave the hospital.

“I’m going to put you in touch with Dr. Robert Blake, who is an expert in brain tumors. The doctor told Lena, who was sitting up in bed with Damien and Lola on either side of her, “For now, I’m going to give you some medicine to help with the symptoms of your tumor and its cancerous cells.” “From now on, Dr. Robert will decide how to treat you to cure you.”

They were all looking at the doctor quite closely and listening to him very carefully.

“So, when can we see Dr. Robert now?” “Damien asked.

“It’s the weekend, and he’s out of town for a conference, but I’ll put Lena as an urgent case in his appointments so you can meet him right after he gets to the hospital tomorrow night,” the doctor said.

The doctor departed after addressing more of Damien and Lola’s questions regarding Lena’s sickness and what they should and shouldn’t do. Lena had been silent the whole time, simply listening and feeling sick about it all.

After that, Damien proceeded to get Lena’s discharge papers ready.

Lola stayed behind to assist Lena in changing out of her hospital gown and into a normal outfit.

“Please, Lola, don’t be so quiet now,” Lena said with a sigh as Lola zipped up the back of her dress. “This silence isn’t good for you.”

Lena grabbed Selene’s wrist and told her to move around till she was standing in front of her.

Lola bit her lip. “I’m scared, Lena, and I’m shocked.” How can you, a lady with such a big heart, have to go through all this pain and loss? “You’re the best person I’ve

ever met,” she said, throwing her hands up in frustration. “You don’t even kick my a*s when I go crazy sometimes. Why does it have to be you who always has to deal with this awful stuff?” It makes me think that God is actually simply sitting up there over the clouds, blind and looking gorgeous, while decent people keep suffering below! “

People lose religion for purely rational reasons, not because of the greatly overrated faith.

Lena didn’t know what to say to Lola’s outburst. These were the same questions she had been asking herself every minute of every day!

“I’m never going to church again until—” Lola said with determination. “Until you are well again, Lena, I swear to everything holy.”

But faith is still powerful, always having the strength to seduce those who have fallen and offer them miracles.

Kellen was furious in his room.

The investigator he hired just told him that Lena’s doctor wouldn’t give out any information about her patients without their permission. And that bad doctor wouldn’t even take Kellen’s money, even though Kellen didn’t give much. It seems that he couldn’t achieve it, no matter how much he wanted to.

His businesses were going down, which meant that thousands of people who worked for them were losing their jobs. He couldn’t afford to pay off a dishonest doctor just now.

It was strange and unsettling. He knew that the authority and money he had taken for granted and bragged about for so long were very near to being gone.

Kellen groaned and fell back onto the chilly bed, his eyes looking blankly at the white ceiling. He knew what he had to do. It wasn't about him; it was about the companies his father had founded and trusted him with. It was about his mother waiting for him at home and the folks who worked for him.

Kellen decided it was time to call Arthur and accept his ridiculous offer, even though he was already feeling angry. But he knew it made sense. Selene looked like the only way out for now, maybe to give him some time to think of something else.

Lena went back to the store two days later. She was still feeling a little weak, but she decided to ignore it and get to work. It seemed better to be active than to let her head rot at home, where she would have all kinds of depressing ideas.

Damien and Lola had strongly opposed her going to work, but they gave in when Lena looked at them with puppy dog eyes. She learned something useful from the kids at the orphanage. Speaking of kids in orphanages... She had to see them soon, especially Dave. Lena also had to deal with the adoption issue, and she hoped for a miracle that would make it work out, even though she knew deep down that it would definitely be a failure and, of course, another layer of misery.

She had asked Damien and Lola to keep her condition a secret for the time being. She didn't want everyone around her to look at her with pity and say things to make her feel better. She wants to live like a normal, everyday person for as long as she can.

She sensed that the Grim Reaper was already on his way to her. But not every single person around her needed to know about it.

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It was after lunch. Even though all the boutique personnel, including Lena, had finished eating, Selene was still eating her second burger while sitting across from Lena. That girl could eat a lot, that's for sure.

Lola was able to say, "You know what Queency said?" amid her frenzied chomping.

Lena was quite interested in a file on her small desk. "Who, Queency?" she said without looking up.

Lola tsked. "Argh, you forgot! Kellen Hart's secretary, the nice lady who worked for him? We became friends after she gave me some Pepto that day when I crawled out of the bathroom."

When Kellen's name came up, Lena's eyes sprang up. But the very next second, she changed her face.

But Lola didn't see anything. "She said Kellen has been acting strange, quiet, and distracted lately."

Lena tried to pretend like she didn't care and went back to examining the paperwork.

Lola scowled and said, "Queency said it's strange." "Normally, Kellen starts his days in the office by breaking coffee mugs, cups, or vases. Since his wife disappeared, he's become quite a crazy bastard, lashing out at employees, smashing smartphones and vases, and other things. But when Queency told him that Damien had canceled his appointment because you were in the hospital, he wasn't acting like his usual beastly self."

“So?” Lena questioned with concern. She had already seen how Kellen had changed since they last saw each other. He had become quite bitter, yet it was his own fault. What baffled her was the alleged break in his angry, ferocious character, as Lola and her new friend Queency called it. Lena felt quite uneasy because they linked his abrupt quiet to her being in the hospital.

Lola said, “You know, Lena, that man even came to our store twice a day while you were sick for the last few days!” “He even asked me about you, and oh my God, he looked like he was chewing on nails when he did.”

“I’m sure it’s just general curiosity,” Lena said, even though she was rather bewildered herself.

What was Kellen really attempting to do here?

She couldn’t say what the likely explanation was.

He didn’t seem to care. He had made it quite apparent that he hated her, not that she thought he would do anything else. Kellen’s distrust had become a habit for him. It had turned into a serious sickness, and its roots had gotten a tight hold on his brain cells.

“But I beg to differ,” Lola said as she straightened up and dropped the sandwich on the desk without ceremony. “Maybe he likes you! Even Queency said something about it.”

Lena’s breath became lodged in her throat and made a hard lump. Lola thought it was just as funny as it was mean.

Lola’s face brightened up at the thought, and Lena thought it was definitely the start of some taunting comments.

She scowled at Lola in a threatening way and then turned her focus back to her file, scanning through invoices and notes with much energy.

Lola rolled her eyes and let out a huff. “Oh, come on, Lena! I’ve seen his body language change so much when he’s been to our store. I’ve even seen him staring at you like a hawk from a distance. A person must be blind not to see it—Kellen’s interested in you! Maybe he’s falling in love with you, and soon he’ll ask you out—” Lola was almost clapping with her conclusion.

“No, he’s not!” Lena shouted in a low voice, unable to take it longer. “He can’t understand what love means.”

And then, all of her pent-up anger burst out all at once. “Kellen Hart is a selfish jerk, a crazy idiot who’s ruined his marriage, treated his wife badly, and is now sleeping with a supermodel while still being married. This kind of guy may seem full of love, stars, and all those cheesy things, but really he’s just full of his own shit.”

“Hey!” Lola lifted both hands in surrender, and her voice was full of laughter. “Hey, there’s no need to get so defensive. I was just saying that you don’t need to get your panties in a twist.”

Lena sighed, feeling bad for being so mean to Lola. The poor girl really didn’t know anything. “Please don’t ever say something like that again, Lola.”

“Wow!” Lola whistled in a fun way. “You really hate that man, even though he has a nice face. The creepy rumors that he killed his wife and vice versa seem to have really gotten to you.”

Lena was getting herself together to deliver a response that was just as playful but more calculated. But then, a loud voice came from the entrance of her tiny cottage.

“So this is how Damien’s crew spends their workdays—talking about pointless stories in the tabloids.”

When Lena saw the man at her door, her eyes nearly flew out of their sockets. Kellen!

And the way he was gazing at her, oh my goodness!

It was just her bad luck. He must have heard some of her precious words, if not all of them.

Lena was angry within. But that was a good thing. She hadn’t done anything wrong, anyhow.

Lena quickly regained her calm and glanced aside, fully ignoring him. But out of the corner of her eye, she saw that Kellen was still gazing at her. He couldn’t disguise the trace of disbelief in his gaze.

Lena nearly laughed. Why did he appear so astonished now? He couldn’t expect her to kiss his feet after everything he had done to her, including stabbing her heart with terrible nails.

“I wonder what Damien will say when he finds out that his so-called trusted business partner is talking badly about the CEO of the business he just signed a contract with, which is still in a fragile state.”

Lena’s body went rigid. It was evident that Kellen was threatening and even more clear that he was making fun of them.

“Thank you for worrying about Damien, Mr. Hart,” Lena said without looking at him. Her eyes stayed on her desk, getting smaller with each syllable. “But I know him to be a good businessman and an even better person. You don’t have to worry about

him. It's better if you mind your own business, literally."

Lola gasped and looked back and forth between Kellen and Lena as if she were witnessing a really strange tennis match.

Finally, Lena looked up and saw that Kellen's stare was getting harder and harder to look at. The outer corner of his left eye twitched. A sign that his anger was getting out of hand. She knew how he acted very well.

She hated how well she knew these small things about him.

"I don't think so, given that he is letting some dishonest people trick him."

"True," Lena said with a blank look. "But don't you think it's strange and even bad for you to say that about yourself?"

"Damn it, Lena! You better—" Kellen looked like he was ready to blow, but he stopped when he saw Lola, who was still watching the alleged tennis play with her mouth open.

For a split second, Lena feared Kellen was going to come back to life and say something horrible to her, but instead, he merely pushed his lips together, turned on his heels, and marched out, out of her sight.

Lena let out a big sigh of relief that she didn't realize she was holding.

But damn! It felt good to verbally abuse that man, especially when he ran away in defeat afterward for a change.

Lola, on the other hand, remained frozen in place because she was so shocked.

“Whoa!” Lola finally screamed. “See, he came back and even looked hurt when he heard you hate him. That crazy guy really does love you! I knew it! Queency has been right all along!”

Lena groaned in amazement.

“Chemotherapy will be the first step in the treatment. It will stop the cancer cells from growing too quickly and hopefully shrink them. After that, surgery will be needed to remove the tumor or part of it without hurting the healthy brain tissue.”

Lena looked worried as Dr. Robert told them about Lena’s tumor therapy. Damien and Lola held her hands very tightly as she sat between them and the wise-looking doctor.

The doctor waited patiently for them to understand what he was saying. The tranquil look spoke for itself. It was clear that he had seen the sight before. Dr. Robert saw the specifics of these procedures every day, so he was used to the fear they caused.

After a heated but very helpful fight with Kellen that afternoon, Damien told Lena that he had gotten a call from the hospital confirming her appointment with Dr. Robert, the brain tumor expert.

Lena had come home early, shaking with fear, and felt like she was going to die right now... and it was probably going to be exactly that.

Once someone has a taste of negativity, it’s really hard to get rid of it. It won’t let go, like an addiction or a terrible habit.

After a long, horrible stillness, Damien cleared his throat. “So, would chemotherapy and surgery fix it?”

“Not—cure. Instead, we’ll call it remission, for there’re always high chances that cancerous tumors may reappear,” the doctor offered them a little smile. “And... we hope that Chemotherapy and surgery will be enough to stop the tumor, but sometimes they can’t get rid of all of them because the brain is so sensitive. In that case, we’ll have to do radiotherapy.”

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The doctor pulled his spectacles up his nose, which was too straight for them to stay on.

Damien took a deep breath.

Lena remarked, “I guess all these treatments with big names will have some side effects?” She tried to sound bold, but her mind was really spinning.

“Yes, sometimes permanent ones,” Dr. Robert said with a nod. “I don’t want to scare you, but there is a 40% chance of life-threatening complications or paralysis during the surgery. Some patients lose their vision, have trouble speaking, or have trouble with balance or coordination. It’s funny how easy it is to damage any part of our body when it comes to the brain.”

Lena didn’t get why it was so funny. It was scarier.

There was stillness again for a few seconds that seemed like they were smothering.

Lola suddenly said, “Oh hell, what can one expect after getting drilled into the brain!” with a harsh gasp.

She makes a good argument.

Dr. Robert raised his eyebrows, which had some gray in them and gazed at Lola for a second before shifting his focus back to Lena and Damien. “But let’s hope for the best, Lena,” he said with a sigh. “Willpower and positivity have made things that seemed impossible possible in my career.”

Lena was sure she didn't have any of those things anymore.

She could also see the clue in the doctor's vague explanation of her therapy. She would need a miracle to go through it without getting hurt, and that was only if she lived through it.

Lena decided not to allow herself hope that she would live. It seemed like a good idea not to anticipate much when fate was so set on dragging her face-first through this never-ending hellfire.

Fate doesn't like it when people go against it.

And she was just too tired.

Someone else didn't like the thought of being defied, especially not by her.

Kellen was now going to their store every day.

When she heard that he was trying to get information on her from other employees without their knowing, her fury boiled. The result was quite bad, at least for her. People were now making up stories about Kellen and her, and she could hear them whispering behind their hands and then talking excitedly.

For real!

What kind of game was Kellen attempting to play?

There was clearly nothing left between them. He didn't care about her anymore; he'd made it clear by his actions over and over again.

What did she think of his sudden interest in her?

It just didn't add up.

So, at one point, Lena stopped asking these questions. She had a lot going on lately, including getting ready to get her head drilled, as Lola put it.

Kellen should be the last item on her list of things to worry about. Still, he made it a point to crawl to the top of that list in strange ways, like the reptilian friend he was.

“Get out of the way.”

Lena had gone to the store to get food. She always went to the store that was closest to her flat.

While she was picking things off the shelves, everything was calm. But then, at that awful time, Kellen actually rushed around the corner of one shelf with his hands full of bottles of wine and scotch. She was astonished when he showed up out of the blue and unwittingly stepped in his path. Kellen, on the other hand, appeared surprisingly calm about running into them.

She couldn't help but frown in anger as he rudely told her to move.

Why did he have to show up practically wherever she went?

In actual life, there could only be so many coincidences.

Lena stepped aside and glanced away, bringing her attention back to the several kinds of oats in front of her.

She heard the sound of bottles ringing, and after a time, Kellen stood next to her and

stared at the oats.

So this jerk was going to just not go to his own awful path once he got rid of her. So funny.

He said something like, "Oats are good for the stomach flu."

Now, who the heck got the stomach flu?

Lena clenched her teeth. She thought Kellen was attempting to start a fight here, maybe over something as simple as oats. He only wanted a reason to offend her. She was quite confident of it.

She had been smart to stay away from him lately, even though he kept coming to the store to pretend to be breathing down Damien's neck, which showed Lola how crazy he was about Lena and how much he liked the female staff's flirting.

This man had been bothering her a lot, and it was growing harder and harder to ignore him.

But she has to stay away. It was important for her mental health.

So Lena just hurriedly picked a random packet of oats that had nuts and other stuff in it. She threw it into her basket, turned around, and ran to the cashier.

While she was in line, she spotted Kellen going to the other counter out of the corner of her eye. He seemed quite angry, and then a hippy guy ran into him. Most of the bottles fell from Kellen's palm with loud, shattering sounds. Lena shivered as she heard the sound of glass cracking. Then she watched with her mouth open as Kellen grabbed the hippy guy by the collar and yelled in his face. The guy, who seemed angry, said something back, and then he stuck his tongue out at Kellen to make things

worse. It would have been funny if Kellen hadn't punched the man in the nose.

Lena paid her bill in the middle of all the noise. She shook her head in disbelief and hastily exited the store while the security officers went after the two stupid men.

It's best to just leave certain issues behind.

But it was sad how dramas wouldn't leave Lena alone. Like the law of gravity, they always found her in the most unexpected ways.

Lena strolled down the sidewalk to her flat, holding her little handbag in one hand and a bag of groceries in the other. She stopped on her step when she saw a familiar person standing tall by the roadway in front of a sleek black Mercedes.

"Hello there. It's been a while, huh?"

Selene Arthur's face didn't match her calm, sardonic voice. Her long hair loosely swung about her thin shoulders, giving her an image of total pride. Her eyes had a cruel gleam in them.

It's scary how pretty something so bad can seem.

Lena was shocked during the first few seconds.

She saw pictures of the magazines on the table in Kellen's office. She had to admit that Selene looked every bit like a supermodel.

She also had to agree that Selene was perfect and far more gorgeous than she was.

And Kellen had picked her.

The truth hurt, especially when the lady who had chosen to lavish all his love on the guy she had given everything to stood directly in front of her.

Lena let out a quiet sigh as Selene kept looking at her as if she had all the time in the world. Lena, on the other hand, did not.

She didn't want any more drama on the way home now. She was looking forward to a nice shower and a big meal since she knew that soon, Chemotherapy would take away her ability to enjoy good cuisine.

Yes, the doctor and the homework she did online were really helpful. She was now extremely aware of how painful this chemotherapy treatment might be.

So Lena started walking again, but this time she went quicker. She made up her mind to merely stroll by Selene.

Whatever crap Selene had planned to fling at her was already making her gut feel bad.

Lena could almost smell it.

“Are you going to run away again?”

Lena stopped moving, with her back to Selene, who laughed a bit.

Selene responded, “That’s good.” Her voice had a trace of a grin in it. “Now that we know how good you are at going to hell, why don’t you do it again? I don’t want you hanging around, Kellen.”

Selene stated with happy certainty, “We’re in love with each other, Lena. He moved on with me.” “Remember that you can’t come between us in any way. I won’t put up

with it, and you won't like what happens next."

Selene's voice dropped in tone, making the threat extremely plain.

It made Lena mad. She turned slowly and faced Selene, hands clenched. "It's not my fault that you feel bad about yourself because I'm here," she said, tilting her head and looking at Selene gently. "You've come between us. Kellen is still very much married, even though there's hardly anything left of that marriage. That makes you his mistress, no matter how you want to see it."

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It was nice to see the mask of pride and happiness fall off Selene's face, leaving behind a look of rage.

Truth is the most deadly weapon there is.

And Lena was really happy with how this weapon worked at that moment. She didn't waste any more time and turned around. As she was going away, she heard Selene below.

"You bitch! I should have just..."

For some reason, Selene stopped in the middle of a sentence and didn't finish the pointless threat she had planned to throw at her. Lena sighed and relaxed her shoulders as she walked away from the annoying woman.

But Selene wasn't done yet. It seems that she has one last weapon stashed in her stock for the concluding section. "He asked me to marry him. We're getting married, and soon you'll see him throwing the divorce papers in your face," Selene said. "That's what a dirty woman like you deserves."

Lena stopped in her tracks as she heard the news. Her heart stopped for a second, and her stomach hurt a lot.

So, they were about to tie the knot.

As the engine roared and the car drove away, she heard a door slam shut.

That night, exactly like they had planned, Lena sank back into the warm water of a bathtub. A faint smell of flowers and vanilla filled the air, and the warm water eased the knots in her stiff shoulders. The meds she was taking were keeping the pain from her tumor at bay, so that was one less thing to worry about.

It didn't help with the ache inside her, though. Her sadness was here to stay. And it looked like this was her only eternity.

She had known for a long time that Kellen and her love were over. It had shriveled up faster than a handful of sand could slip between one's fingers.

But hearing of his upcoming new marriage still ached like a dagger cutting up an old wound. She had failed every time she attempted to get rid of the affection she had for him.

Did she have to ask Kellen one day how to get over him? How do you stop loving? He was doing a very good job of it, and she was bewildered because she thought she was the only one in the world who loved someone so much that it was killing her more than the disease did.

Lena shut her eyes tight. Tears ran down the sides of her temples and into the hot water, which rippled because she was shaking.

She despised him for putting her through so much anguish. And she despised herself for letting him have that power.

Kellen's face was harsh, and his eyes were focused. "You'll never insult Selene again," he said.

Lena groaned and didn't take her eyes off the file in her fingers.

The next day, after Kellen met Selene, he barged into her cabin without warning. At first, Lena jumped in surprise from where she was standing in front of her desk, but then she got quite angry.

Selene would definitely hurry back to her new dad and tell him that Lena was rude to her on the street. But it looked like Selene had failed to say one key thing about the whole thing.

Kellen said, "I'm talking to you, woman." "Look at me."

Lena didn't listen to what he said. It may go to hell with him.

She said, "I guess she forgot to tell you that it was she who stopped me on my way home and started what I just ended."

"But I've heard that it's the other way around," Kellen said angrily. "You called my fiancée a name that hurt her feelings..."

What? Mistress? Wasn't Selene just that before Kellen ended his current marriage?

Kellen stopped right there, and Lena finally glanced up, her stomach churning.

It was funny how easily he could believe all the falsehoods, yet he got so defensive about one clear fact.

Lena was able to grin with her lips closed.

Lena said, "I don't expect you to believe me." She really didn't anticipate anything good from him, only pain and cruel remarks. "Anyway, I don't see anything wrong with what I said. It's not my fault that the truth hurt someone."

In a split second, Kellen was on Lena's face. He grabbed her elbows hard, and the file fell out of her grasp. She felt her b**t grinding into the edge of her desk as Kellen's big body loomed over her small body, and her perfume surrounded her in a very personal way.

"You have no right to try to humiliate others when you haven't been any better yourself," Kellen said with a furious sneer. His words were as poisonous as the night he destroyed her heart... a long time ago. "Did you forget about the terrible things you've done, Lena?"

His fingers were getting tighter around her elbows, almost breaking through the skin.

Lena fought the temptation to hiss in anguish, but her face could have given it away, and she felt Kellen's grip slack a little. She used it as her moment, shook her arms free, and pushed her hands against his strong chest, trying to push him away with all her effort. He didn't move much, though, because she was so weak.

"Out of all people, you don't have to remind me of what I've done," she whispered and shouted, praying that no one heard through the thin walls of her modest hut. "I know exactly what I've done and what I haven't done, and I don't need to explain myself to hypocrites like you. Not ever again!"

That just made Kellen more angry. He was only a few inches away from her, but now he was bending down, closing that gap, too. Lena couldn't even move back because the desk was in the way. She just leaned back as much as she could with her upper body. But Kellen didn't give up until their pelvises were pushed against one other, which made Lena gasp.

"You make me so angry," Kellen muttered through clenched teeth, his gaze full of fury and a hint of want.

Lena was thrown off by how strange and exciting his combination of feelings was.

He put his hand on her hip, and her whole body shook.

“Kellen!” she said softly.

It was as if hearing her say his name had sparked something in him. He whimpered a little and moved his face down till their noses touched very tenderly.

“How can you still do this to me?!” his confused voice said in a worried tone. It seemed like he was talking to himself.

His lips brushed against hers lightly, making her dizzy from a very old, familiar addiction. Her heart raced a million times faster than her breath.

The door suddenly burst open, and Lola rushed in, full of energy. “Lena baby!!! Did you see this?” Lola was too busy flipping through the magazines in her hands to pay attention. “It’s clear that Kellen’s not just a maniac but a perverted two-timing scoundrel to dip his anchor between that slutty supermodel’s legs permanently while chasing you like a frustrated wolfy everywhere! Just look at what they’ve written over here....,” and the rest of Lola’s words trailed off as she finally looked up from the magazines to focus on the very much glued bodies of Kellen and Lena before her.

Lola’s eyes got bigger when she saw Kellen. The next minute, her scream rang out through the store. She looked embarrassed, perhaps because she had just said awful things about the individual without any filter. Was directly in front of her and, from the looks of it, had heard everything while they were in a very uncommon, private circumstance.

Lena finally got her senses back and pushed Kellen away again. But that wasn’t necessary because Kellen was already backing away on his own.

Kellen cleared his throat, and then, a second later, he was out of there in a rage, leaving Lola speechless.

Lena groaned in anger, her cheeks crimson. She turned back, away from Lola, and slapped her shaking hands on the tabletop.

She loathed him for still influencing her to this level. She loathed herself for giving him that power.

It was funny how Kellen could make her already bad self much worse.

“Lena!” Lola screamed. “What the hell was that back there?”

Lena clenched her eyes tightly and drew a big, nervous breath. “Nothing.”

“Nothing?” Lola got closer. “It didn’t seem like nothing, Lena,” she said, and then she screamed again. “Lena! What—oh my—are you okay?”

Lena was having trouble breathing; her mind was spinning, and she felt tired as when she was in the hospital. She couldn’t say anything because an ache that was becoming quite familiar to her suddenly started in her head and got worse with each passing second.

Lena remembered that she had forgotten to take her prescription that morning.

Lola instantly ran up to her in a panic and gripped Lena’s shoulders. “I need to call the doctor—”

“No—just—” Lena was groaning now because the agony was so bad that it made her eyes ache. Lola helped her get to the chair.

Lena had to work hard to gesture to her purse on the opposite side of the desk, but Lola got it right away.

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Lena had a hard time getting the tablets out of the bag that Lola had been holding open for her. Lena looked thankful as Lola helped her drink from a glass of water to take her medications.

After a while, the pain becomes less strong. Lola had been caressing Lena's back the whole time with a worried look on her face.

The medications made Lena numb, which was a fake relief. She was still trying to get used to it.

But the fortunate thing about her small incident at that point made what Lola saw earlier a different story. Lola was fascinated by Kellen's reported deep interest in Lena, but her health was more important to her.

So, when Lola eventually started the questioning, it didn't sound like an interrogation. Thank goodness.

"Did the crazy person touch you?"

But it was still just as embarrassing.

Lena cleared her throat. "Nope."

Lola looked like she was thinking. "Did you both then touch each other inappropriately?"

"No way, Lola!" Lena said, breathing heavily. "We were fighting about how he was

always breathing down Damien's neck." At least it wasn't a lie. "And then, like the crazy man he is, he stalked closer to threaten me."

"Thank God for the person who made threats if what I saw was a bloody threat!" Lola said, throwing her hands up in frustration. "For Heaven's sake, Lena, it's clear that he was trying to cast a spell on you and cheat on his fiancée with you."

Lola angrily put a hand on Lena's shoulder and said, "That maniac is really a filthy thing. His interest in you is very interesting, but he's bloody engaged to that model, and whatever he's trying to do now is so f*****g wrong."

Lola did an excellent job of explaining what was going on here. Lena was quite relieved.

Lena said, "I agree."

Kellen was completely overwhelmed by all that was wrong. What if he viewed the photo immediately?

Would she be alive to see that day?

In any case, she didn't care anymore. So much had happened in the last several months, so much had changed, and so much had been lost.

Nothing on earth or in heaven can bring back the past.

When things became too hard, and the tension seemed like it was going to kill her, with painful memories closing in on her from all sides, her safe place always rescued her. Gwen's orphanage visits on Sundays were regular, but lately, these surprise visits were becoming frequent, too.

Lena sat on a seat in the orphanage's field that night. She was bouncing Dave on her lap. She smiled as the youngster laughed and cried with joy.

Gwen sighed and said, "I'm sorry, Lena," looking at her with sympathy. "I can't give Dave to you, no matter how much I want to."

Lena was right: her application to adopt was probably turned down. This time, the lethal sickness that was ticking like a time bomb in her head triumphed.

Lena's eyes filled with tears, but she was able to grin through them. "I get it, Mom."

She got it. She did, that's for sure.

Dave deserved the best. All of these kids deserved the best. They have the right to a safe existence and a steady place to grow up... Lena wouldn't be able to provide any of them at the moment.

She wasn't even sure if she would be alive next year or six feet under the ground, literally!

"But don't worry, I can visit the kids and my Dave as much as I want, right?" Lena said, wiping away her tears and running her fingers over Dave's adorable tiny hair on top of his head.

Mom nodded and smiled, too. "Yes, you can."

A bunch of youngsters raced by them, chasing a small girl with golden locks that were flying all over the place. Dave turned his head around and looked at them with his mouth open and drool pouring down his chest. The youngster seemed quite awake. He even waved his fists about and yelled a little as if to protest the terrible noise pollution surrounding him.

“Are you going to come to our charity brunch next month?” Mother inquired after a while of quiet.

“I definitely will,” Lena said with a big smile on her face, taking a quick breath. It was clear that she was really excited. “Don’t miss the chance to see these cute little kids having fun, showing off their skills to the guests, and probably meeting people who will adopt them soon and give them a family and a loving home.”

The orphanage held these charity brunches twice a year to get individuals from all walks of life to help make the lives of these kids better in some manner.

Instead of merely being a guest, Lena had opted to help with the planning. She didn’t have a lot of money, but this way, she could still be a part of the brunch.

Kellen let out a sigh as he looked out the window of his living room. His duplex apartment offered a lovely view, but it didn’t help his mood at all at that moment.

Kellen’s heart was pounding in his throat after the nearly kiss this morning, and he rushed out of the store. He had kissed Lena many times before, and the memories of those kisses had never left him. But the instant their lips touched, he thought he felt something break inside his chest. He remembered how her lips tasted, how she moaned, and how her eyes looked as if they were making love.

He had a strong want to turn around, go back to her office, and take her away to a remote area where they could relive their old memories and talk about the passion they had.

It just couldn’t be.

He contacted Selene instead and met her at a restaurant. When she kissed him, he didn't stop her but instead kissed her back. But unhappily, it still didn't seem right, like all the previous times Selene had kissed him. It tasted flat and didn't have any of the intensity that normally came over him when he kissed Lena.

Selene appeared happy, too, and she definitely didn't agree with Kellen about how close they were.

It simply made Kellen even angrier.

It all felt off.

"You met Lena?" It didn't seem like a question. Celeste Hart spoke it more like she was sitting on the couch across from Kellen.

Kellen was shocked as he stared at his mother.

How did she find out about it?

"Selene told me," Celeste said before Kellen could even ask.

Kellen grumbled and then stopped talking. He had to tell Selene to stop what she was doing. He didn't want a fiancée who liked to move news around for no reason and in a way that annoyed him.

Kellen softly murmured, "She's my new client's business partner," and then he turned to stare out the window again.

"You need to get over that dangerous woman, son," Celeste said firmly, yet her eyes were gentle on her son, who was now looking at her in disbelief.

“You came to my engagement party with Selene, and you still say that I haven’t moved on from Lena?” Kellen shouted. He let out a deep breath, and his frown disappeared as he saw Celeste quiver.

He recognized that he had grown quite defensive, and his actions were giving away things he hated about himself.

He despised Lena for shattering his heart, but he also couldn’t stop thinking about her every second.

Celeste put a hand on Kellen’s to calm him. “I just want my only son to be happy.”

He hadn’t told his mother that he was engaged to Selene more as a business deal than as a relationship based on love or other feelings. But it looked like Celeste was starting to see through him, even if he had his mouth shut.

Celeste had never hated Lena before, but now that Lena’s true face had been revealed, Celeste hated her with all her heart. It was clear that Celeste was now very determined to keep her only kid away from people like Lena, following a very instructive talk with Selene.

“I’ve moved on, Mom. I really have.” It seemed like he was trying to convince himself more than his mother. “She’ll get the divorce papers in a few days. Our marriage will finally be over.” His voice broke without him meaning to. He couldn’t help but give up that tiny bit.

Lena fell back onto the soft cushion and stared at the IV line that was connected to the back of her hand.

She didn’t think it would be as exciting as she had thought Chemotherapy would be.

She was transported to the infusion suite and given pre-medications once she got to the hospital. When she asked the nurse, a middle-aged lady with a perpetual smile on her face, what it was, the nurse told her it was just anti-nausea medication. The nurse put an IV in her arm and then departed. She came back every 10 minutes to check on her.

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Lena looked to her right as she heard a lengthy snore. She grinned when she saw it.

Damien had offered to be her guardian angel while she took all of her medicines for an hour. He looked fatigued after a long day at work, so Lena told him to lie down on the couch and converse from there. That way, he may also catch some sleep.

Damien's heavy eyelids lost the struggle to stay open immediately in front of Lena's gaze. Since then, his slurred speech has turned into quiet snores.

Lena was happy that he was finally getting some sleep and not fretting about her like a crazy mother hen.

But after a while, it was tiresome to see Damien sleeping with the IV in her hand. There wasn't much furniture in the room either, and branches of trees with flowering leaves covered the view from the open window to her left.

Lena was about to put on the TV and watch anything at a low volume when the door to her room creaked open a bit, which scared her. She believed the nurse had come back, but it was only a little girl's head, maybe four or five years old, that peeked in. Lena was glared at by two round eyes that seemed like they were up to no good. The girl's little hands kept the door open. The girl's little hospital gown and scarf over her head showed that she had already had a lot of chemotherapy sessions at such a young age.

Lena remembered seeing other kids who were getting cancer treatment walking around or sitting in the corridor. There were people of all ages fighting in the oncology section.

Lena smiled a little, and the little girl at the door smiled back after a second.

Lena waved her free hand to tell the girl to come in. The tiny girl walked right in, and the door closed behind her.

The girl said, “My name is Dala. What is your name?” and put her hands on the side of Lena’s bed.

Lena couldn’t help but laugh. It seemed like this tiny kid spoke “R” instead of “L,” and Lena had found a new companion to hang out with for the next hour.

“Lena, which room are you...”

But Damien snored loudly again, making a sound like a lion’s roar. Of course, the other individuals in the room who were awake laughed out loud.

And since then, a sweet new friendship has grown. Dana, or Dala as she liked to be called, was well knowledgeable about all the negative effects of Chemotherapy.

“When it comes out again, my hair will be blue.”

Lena had to bite her lip to keep from laughing when she saw Dana’s very serious look. “How can you be so sure?”

“Every morning, they give me these blue pills. Now my nails are a little blue because of them, and my hair will be too.”

Kids’ thinking is strange for practically everything, and that’s because they are so innocent.

Lena smiled and said, “I guess my hair will be blue too in the future.” She helped

Dana onto the bed and snuggled next to her. “But it’s not a bad thing,”

Dana looked like she had hope.

“Why don’t you just stay at my place again, Lena?” Damien’s face showed anxiety and dread, and creases appeared on his forehead. “The doctor clearly said that the side effects of Chemotherapy will show up. What if you get sick? You won’t even stay at Lola’s house or let one of us stay at yours.”

Lena moved up to smooth out the creases on his brow. “I still have some time to enjoy my freedom before the side effects get bad. The doctor said the first Cycle of Chemos is lighter, remember?”

Also, she didn’t want to be a bigger burden on Damien and Lola. They were already doing so much for her, and she didn’t think she would ever be able to pay them back.

Damien grumbled back and then let out a long breath. He put his hand on her cheek and kissed her head quickly. “Keep the phone close by, and my number is on your speed dial, right? And don’t forget to eat only foods that are easy to digest. That means no fast food, spice, or…”

Lena nodded and rolled her eyes. “Yes, yes, captain, I get it all. Now, don’t have a heart attack!”

Damien grinned, and his eyes crinkled at the corners with joy. He told her firmly, “You feel a little sick, and you’ll call me,” and then he hugged her tightly. “And don’t forget to call Lola when you get home. She’s mad that you asked me to go with you instead of her.”

“I will,” Lena said with a smile as she watched Damien get into his car.

Lena walked inside the building a little slower than usual since the medicines she had just taken an hour before made her feel a little sleepy without knowing that a pair of hostile eyes were watching from a distance. She didn't even notice the footsteps behind her.

She didn't know someone was behind her until she got to her apartment door and was tiredly looking for her keys in her purse.

Lena turned around because she felt tired without thinking about it. She frowned when she saw that it was the last person she expected to see in front of her flat, with the ugliest scowl on his face.

Lena thought he had seen her with Damien because he looked like he was about to kill someone. She had seen enough of Kellen's behavior to come to that one conclusion, so it wasn't hard for her to guess that he was probably calling her a lot of names in his head.

It was clear that his dirty ideas had taken over his head again. And that made Lena take a step back because she didn't want to be what Kellen had become. She wouldn't listen to any more of his stupid complaints.

Nor now, nor ever again.

"What brought you here?" she said, not bothering to hide her annoyance.

Kellen gritted his teeth. He pulled his lips together into a narrow line. "I didn't know that only Damien could come here. Does Ryan come by, too?"

The dirty sign made her stomach flip. It was horrible that this man, who had previously said he loved her with all his heart, should think such horrible things about her.

“No,” she was able to say calmly. “These days, it’s only Damien because he cares about me so much, and I really enjoy being with him. Just like you enjoy being with Selene.”

The insinuation worked as planned.

Kellen’s face got angrier if it was possible. “Selene and I are serious. We’re getting married soon...”

This news was becoming very old.

“Who said Damien and I aren’t serious?” Lena said, tilting her head to the side. She was happy to see Kellen’s anger slowly fade as what she had said sank into his foolish brain.

If it’s going to burn no matter what, then adding some patrol shouldn’t be that bad of a sin. I’d rather have one big explosion that ends it all than go through the horrible process of having my skin, flesh, and bones burn to ashes.

His shoulders became tight, and it seemed like he had stopped breathing. He felt furious, angry, and scared, but the pain in his eyes was so great that it drowned out all of those other feelings. It took her by surprise, and she wanted to take what his eyes were saying without saying a word and turn it into words that she wanted to hear.

Instead, she turned away.

Listening to her heart would be a bad idea.

Kellen replied in a chilly, scary voice, “At last, that illegitimate child of yours will get a name, huh?” to illustrate his point.

It was funny how he always went over that line and got to the point where it hurt the most.

She was shocked by what he said. It hurt like a slap. The pain was, in some ways, worse than any physical attack could possibly cause. Lena was so tired that she didn't even flinch. It was a scary, burned-out condition.

"Hart, if the only reason you came here is to annoy me with your stupid gibbering, then know that I don't have time for it." Lena groaned and turned to the side a bit to open the door.

"I'm here to give you these—"

Lena stared back at his outstretched hand, which had two envelopes in it that had come from inside his coat. Lena received the envelopes with considerable reluctance, giving them a dubious glance.

Kellen responded, "It's the invitation card for Selene and my engagement party next week." "Sign the other one as soon as you can. It's the divorce papers."

Lena stood there frozen.

Kellen stormed out without looking back.

A tear that didn't listen dropped and soaked into one of the envelopes. She looked blankly at the moist circle the warm liquid made for a bit before ultimately going into her flat and shutting the door behind her.

She walked slowly to her bed. She was so tired that she felt it all over her body. She couldn't say if the pain in her stomach was because of her first chemotherapy session or because her marriage was already over.

That night, she lay down with the envelopes in her hands. She was so tired that she had no choice but to give in to it, even though she knew that tears were streaming down her face and the pillow was wet and chilly.

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It seemed like I was standing in the midst of a crossroad, where the stories say evil lives. Kellen seemed to be waiting there to give his soul to the devil.

Lena's bold suggestion that night that she could really be serious about that bloody Damien had already gotten lodged in Kellen's throat like a painful spike that wouldn't go away or let him forget about it.

Hitting the gym was just as pointless as yelling at his colleagues who didn't know what they were doing. Whiskey couldn't even burn his throat enough to ease the pain in his chest.

And then there was that stupid engagement party that was coming up soon. When he accidentally answered Selene's call, she wouldn't stop calling him to ask why he hadn't answered her calls. This made him want to hit someone in the face. He would have told Selene to f*ck off if it weren't for his business. But that was clearly not conceivable. One night, when he was intoxicated, he couldn't remember anything, and that stupid debt to Isaac Arthur was the worst thing that ever happened to him.

Was this going to be the rest of his life?

Oh my God! It already felt like hell.

And Kellen couldn't help but think of Lena; he never got tired of talking to her. Before Lena's true face was revealed, things were so different and easy.

Kellen fastened the last button on his dress shirt in front of the mirror on the door of his wardrobe. The celebration night has finally come. He made sure that his face

didn't show any of those dangerous feelings that were making him sick.

He was in the middle of turning around when he accidentally smacked the empty vase with his knuckles while picking up the car keys from the side table. The vase fell to the floor before he could even move. The bits of broken glass were all over his shoe-covered feet... He suddenly felt uneasy in his stomach, almost like a warning. It seemed like something bad was waiting just around the bend.

Lena stepped in front of the mirror and glanced at herself. The royal blue dress that came down to her knees fit her well. She didn't have any jewelry on, but her hair falling down her shoulders filled that space.

She dressed for tonight in a way that was not at all suggestive, and that was exactly what she wanted.

She groaned and turned away from her mirror. The grin on her lips didn't help the tiredness in her eyes.

The throwing up, tiredness, and feeling like she couldn't breathe were making her days worse. It was clear that her health was becoming worse, and the adverse effects of Chemotherapy were showing up faster than she had thought they would. She had to eat bland food because her stomach wasn't working right, but it looked like she was refusing it, too.

On top of everything else, it was getting more and harder for her to control her bad feelings.

Since Kellen gave her the divorce papers and the invitation to his engagement party, she had been wondering nonstop how it was possible to move on from someone so

quickly. She wanted to know that secret for herself because it was evident that she was still stuck where she had damaged herself.

Lena picked up her purse and then paused for a bit before eventually signing the divorce papers.

She realized that it would only be right to present these documents to Kellen on the same night that he took a step toward a future with the lady he had chosen, just like he had given her the papers and the invitation at the same time. She also thought that a divorce would be the nicest gift she could give him.

She left her room and walked by the green paintings on the wall. Damien had put them up a while ago and said that green was excellent for health. Yes, they made her eyes feel better, but she didn't expect them to work a miracle while the malignant tumor was taking away her chances of living.

Lena left the house thinking about the paintings she had left behind.

But green is a miracle.

It's a green miracle.

There used to be a lot of green outside her parents' house. That was a long time ago!

As she became older, green was no longer as important...

It was strange how her thoughts seemed to be repeating themselves, getting mixed up like she was losing control of them very rapidly. She said it was just jitters and brushed any doubts aside.

Selene's smile didn't leave her face as she whirled about in her floor-length party dress, which had a deep split at the side that teased her long, creamy leg. The fancy chandelier in her fancy hotel room even looked dimmer than the happiness that was coming off of her.

She was so happy that nothing could stop her. And why would it? She was finally ready to legally claim Kellen as her own, and she was alone.

Only she understood how far she had to go to see this day.

She had even murdered to obtain Kellen. Not only did they lie, but they also plotted.

She loved Kellen that much. She wanted him that badly.

"I can't wait to meet you, Kellen. The whole freaking world will see tonight," she said with a laugh. "That you belong to me."

Someone knocked on the door.

"Come in," Selene said in a happy voice as a hotel worker came in, said hello, and then departed with a glass of wine she had purchased earlier.

A drink of greatness before she went out to get her boyfriend.

But that taste made her pout a little. It seemed a little strange, like wine, but not quite. Selene took another drink, shrugged, and flung her head back to swallow it all in one go. At that point, her phone rang. It was Isaac Arthur, her wonderful father, who had made things happen so much faster. It turned out to be a great idea to blackmail Kellen a bit.

"Yes, Daddy," Selene sang as she picked up the phone.

Ryan leaned against the wall outside the hotel room and gave some money to the staff, who looked impassive and then ran out without saying a thing.

Ryan's lips curled up at the corners, making a nasty smile.

This was the start of Selene's end. That woman was about to have the finest night of her life.

Lena came into the big hall of the hotel where the celebration was happening through the big double doors.

Memories hit her like a lightning bolt, and she had to stop for a moment. They were the recollections of the good times, the golden days of love and optimism she had with Kellen.

She remembered a similar, fancy event that had announced her engagement to Kellen. There were happy people, bright lights, decorations, and food all throughout the hall... Everything had made this feeling of endless delight. It felt like a stinging pin prick inside because I knew that none of that happiness would stay long.

And now she was here as a guest, to really set him free and see him promise the rest of his life to someone else.

She craned her neck to try to find Kellen among the crowd. The idea was simple: find Kellen, congratulate him, remain for a bit, and then go and never come back. Kellen should be smart and tough enough not to show up in front of her again after tonight.

But her quest stopped in the middle when she heard a voice she knew.

“You!”

Lena turned around and saw Celeste Hart there in front of her.

There had been a huge hole in her life since she lost both of her parents at the same time while she was in high school. As soon as Lena married Kellen, Celeste became like a mother to her. Celeste had told Lena to call her mom just as Kellen did, and since then, Celeste had given Lena the love a mother gives a daughter.

Lena’s eyes brightened when she saw the woman again after so long. If you suddenly saw the dear face and felt happy... If Lena hadn’t been there, she could have taken a step back and thought about how time and circumstances can change things.

“Mom...” came out of her mouth freely and often.

“Don’t call me that,” Celeste quickly said, appearing quite dissatisfied. “You lost the right to call me that the moment you turned against my son.”

Lena’s eyes lost their glint of optimism and beautiful recollections.

“You amaze me to no end,” Celeste said as she shook her head. “You’re showing how low you can go and how shameless you really are by coming here tonight to ruin everything for my son again now that he’s finally moving on!”

“I came here to give him the divorce papers, signed. He asked me to come.” Lena said this through clenched teeth, unwilling to show any vulnerability as others around them started to turn their heads, thinking something interesting was going on.

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Celeste's eyes went wide with shock before her face got even more angry. "And you came here to cause more trouble? I know you've been trying to manipulate my son again since he got here to Velden. But I'm warning you, Lena, back off. We've already seen your true face behind that innocent mask you wear." Celeste lowered her voice a little and looked at the people around her. "And I'm glad to hear that you couldn't get away from the punishment your sins brought. I've heard you feel ashamed to be seen with that child of yours. But you should know that it's something you brought on yourself, no matter how embarrassing it is. Now go back to your child, Lena, and stop chasing after my Kellen."

Are you serious?

So that's what many thought was the reason they never saw her with her child?

It's no surprise that there were so many people who didn't like humans. People in society might be really cruel at times.

"I have to tell you, ma'am, that the rumors are as silly as you and your son's imaginations are," she said. Her eyes were full of angry tears, but she lifted her chin defiantly against the constant stream of insults and accusations. "And don't worry about what I should do. I know it's better to go back to my child than to live with people like you."

She quickly pulled the divorce papers out of her handbag and put them into Celeste's hands, which were not expecting them. "Please do me a favor and give this to Kellen. Tell him he's free."

Lena rushed out of the hall without looking back, without even pausing to scowl at the people pointing at her as if they knew... as if they could now see who she was. As the woman who had done wrong, as the woman who had been rejected.

Kellen shook his head and looked at the noise near the entrance of the hall for a second. It didn't seem like much. He could only see the tiny group of people gathering there plainly from where he was standing on the other side. It was like a usual party drama.

The gentleman Kellen was talking to, who was also a businessman, said, "It must be a catfight."

"Indeed." He scowled when he saw the time on his watch and realized that Selene was taking too long. He didn't want to hold his future wife in his arms; he just wanted to go away from all the people who either made him angry with their congratulations or made him want to kill them because they were so interested in his failed marriage.

Isaac Arthur had already ruined his mood when he strolled in and praised Kellen for making the correct choice.

Just when Kellen was thinking about sending someone to get Selene and get this drama over with, she stepped in—more like tumbled in. The visitors moved back as Selene wobbled forward, like a sea splitting in two.

Kellen was shocked when Selene smiled too much and finally saw him.

Damn, she was intoxicated!

Kellen saw the shocked looks on both his mother's and Isaac Arthur's faces out of the

corner of his eye.

Selene's eyes were half closed, and she had a Cheshire smile on her lips. She tripped over her own dress as she got to him and was ready to fall face first. He was lucky to catch her at the last minute, so she didn't kiss his feet or, even worse, throw up on them.

He attempted to get her to stand up straight, but it didn't work. It was hard to keep someone who was so serious about not defying gravity up.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Kellen said in a low voice. "Why the hell are you drunk now?" he yelled at the conclusion.

Selene started a little when he suddenly raised his voice, but when she glanced up at him, she smiled dreamily.

"Bloody hell," Kellen said, closing his eyes for a second as his anger grew. "Stop acting like a fool!"

Selene's smile grew bigger, and her eyes were now shiny with alcohol. She laughed like she had heard the best joke when she said, "Fool?" "No, sweetheart, I'm not a fool, but you are. In fact, you're the biggest fool I've ever seen..." she mumbled. "That makes me love you even more, you know."

She leaned in to kiss him, but Kellen stopped her by holding her shoulders. He was convinced that the visitors were having a great time with the drama. "Shut the f**k up."

"But Kellen..." she moaned.

"Your silly drama is getting on my nerves..."

“She’s only telling the truth, Kellen,” a loud voice said, cutting him short.

People turned their heads to see where the sound came from. Isaac Arthur, who was on his way to help with the problem, stopped dead in his tracks.

Selene was busy sulking at Kellen, but as she saw the man walk out of the crowd, she screamed, “Ryan!”

“Ryan!”

Selene had yelled in a drunken way. Kellen followed her drooping eyes and saw Ryan emerging out of the mob of excited fans.

Ryan strolled up to Kellen and Selene in a very calm way, with a slight smile on his lips. Ryan said again, “Selene is only telling the truth, Kellen.” “The truth.”

He pointed at Kellen and said, “You’re the biggest fool of them all.” A flash of anger broke through his generally calm attitude.

Kellen was already quite angry with Selene’s inebriated behavior, and now Ryan’s abrupt arrival and snarky comments made him much angrier. His eyes became slits. “Why the hell are you here? I don’t remember inviting you to this party.”

But Ryan didn’t seem to care what he said. Selene, on the other hand, wobbled while smiling at Kellen. He was having a hard time keeping her upright and not charging at the calm and smug face in front of him.

Ryan rolled his eyes and said, “Oh, just stop your stupid rants for once, Hart.”

At that point, Kellen knew he had had enough. He let go of Selene, who was leaning against the pillar a few feet away and was too lazy to get up. Then he ran toward

Ryan and grabbed him by the collar. “You have the nerve to come to my party without an invitation and talk shit!”

“No, not me. It’s you,” Ryan said as he violently yanked Kellen’s hand away and walked a few steps away from him. “You’ve gone too far with everything.”

“Get the hell out of here, Ryan, or I’ll have to call the guards,” Kellen said, his voice quivering with anger. He couldn’t believe he had to deal with both his inebriated fiancée and his wife’s f*ck-buddy at the same time. That’s crazy.

Ryan clucked his tongue and said, “Oh, come on.” “I only came here to say congratulations. You don’t have to be so rude.”

Ryan looked around at the confused expressions of visitors, Hart’s friends and family, and business partners. Some were gazing at him, while others were scowling at him. “I’m here to congratulate this great business tycoon for avoiding bankruptcy by selling himself to Miss Arthur.”

Celeste, who was now next to Kellen, gasped when she heard what Ryan said. Kellen was ready to yell for the guards, but Celeste stopped him by putting a hand on his shoulder. “Kellen, what is he...?”

Kellen turned away, gritting his teeth and making Celeste seem sad. She must have known about that previous loan, and now that she had put two and two together, she found a consequence that didn’t look good at all.

“No... it can’t be...” she said, still shocked more than not believing.

Ryan stopped for a second and said, “I’m only telling the truth, Mrs. Hart.” “Just like Lena did that night.”

Kellen said coldly, “Don’t.” He didn’t want anyone to talk about that awful night again since it brought back too many emotions of treachery and pain. And he really didn’t want Ryan to be the one to tell the story.

“Why not?” Ryan asked with a laugh. “Throwing your wife out of your house and life when she was at her most vulnerable, based on some photos that can be changed, must have seemed like a noble thing to do. It must have seemed okay to you to deny the child she was carrying and insult it in the worst way possible. By the way, Hart, I hope you were smart enough to get something solid to back up your theory. Maybe a DNA test report?” Ryan tilted his head and paused for a moment, pretending to be in great disarray. “Or maybe you didn’t have any backup at all. Maybe what you really did was fail as a husband, a father, and a freaking human being.”

The whole hall was so quiet that you could hear a pin drop. Selene’s quiet laugh in the background was the sole sound. It was impossible to tell what she was thinking about the whole speech. She was going to say what she thought about the things Ryan brought up, but Kellen’s angry shout stopped her short.

“It’s sad that you’re trying to make things better for Lena. Just shut the f**k up and leave.”

Kellen looked for the guards who should have been there by now, but he couldn’t see any of them, even though he could hear the noise. It seemed strange that the security he had hired just for the gathering was not in sight.

What the hell?

“Yes. Leave!” Selene couldn’t remain quiet any longer. There was no way an important talk was going to happen without her meddling in it. “You, too, need to leave, Ryan,” she said with a sneer. “That bitch.”

Kellen sighed in exasperation and shoved his forefingers into the gap between his eyebrows.

Isaac Arthur, who had been standing calmly next to Selene until now, clasped her elbow in a serious way. “Selene—”

Selene tsked in disgust when he cut her off, though.

“No, Dad, let me talk! Shhh...” She pulled her extremely pale-looking father aside and swayed a little. “Let me tell them how hard I thought it would be, but look,” she said, looking at Kellen with a triumphant expression in her eyes. She was drunk, and her face was dreamy with this obsessive love. “Look how easily I got rid of her from Kellen’s life. All I needed were a few altered photos made by a professional. Nothing more,” she said with a laugh. “Aw! I still remember how in love Ryan and Lena looked in those pictures... oh, how in love they were.”

There were a lot of gasps.

The harm had been done. Isaac Arthur closed his eyes in disappointment.

Ryan was the only one who grinned. His mouth curved up into a smile that was full

of anger, revenge, and deep sadness.

Kellen was speechless. It felt like an electric wire was hitting him. As Selene's words slowly sank in, his heart stopped pounding.

Photos that have been changed. The images of Ryan and Lena have been changed.

Celeste lurched back and fell onto a chair. She sat there frozen, holding on to the reality that had been revealed.

"Fools!" Selene was laughing so hard that she couldn't stop talking about her heartache, not realizing how much trouble she had just caused. "All... all of them are bloody fools."

It was a rough pull-off of a blindfold of hate and mistrust. Waking up to find that everything around me had been wrecked while I slept was the worst way to wake up. Kellen was in the thick of that mess. He remained there like a statue, thinking over and over every loud syllable that Selene had said.

"Of course, Selene," Ryan said with a chuckle. "And since you've told them so much about your good deeds, why don't you also tell them exactly how Lena was hit by a car that night? Let them know how well you planned the whole thing."

Isaac Arthur said defensively, "My daughter is drunk and clearly not making any sense!" as Selene tried to respond joyfully again. "You won't be able to prove anything based on what she says now."

"Oh, but sadly, I've gathered enough witnesses and seized the men your darling daughter hired to do her dirty work. It took me some time, but I can finally say that I'll be nicely proving everything that she'd done with my Lena," Ryan said indignantly. "Actually, the police would be there any second now."

Kellen couldn't blink or move a muscle, even as Isaac Arthur ran at Ryan, who effortlessly pushed him away with a powerful fist. After that, Isaac stayed on the floor in the same position he was in before.

Kellen saw everything, even though he felt like a crippled entity. The reality hit him so hard that he didn't know how to get over it anymore. It was like a thunderbolt. Memories of that dark night came flooding back, and he instantly saw them in a new way.

It was as if a mirror had suddenly appeared in front of him, and he could see a cruel image that was no one else's but his own.

Lena was correct. He said she was cheating on him, but he was the one who cheated on her. He was the b**t of the joke.

He really had been a great and complete idiot!

He felt sick to his stomach when he thought about how he had believed those stupid manipulated photographs more than the lady he loved, so he had tossed them at her face.

“Don't you dare say my name with that dirty mouth of yours...”

“I hate you, Lena. You make me sick. Tell me, how long has this been going on? Ryan was at my house last week, right? Did you have s*x in our bed, too? Tell me!”

He felt bad about the things he had spoken to her that were still ringing in his ears. He saw all of the memories of her sad eyes, tear-stained face, desperate pleas, and the way he had pushed her away so roughly, insulted her, and made her feel bad in ways that made him feel so ashamed to even think about them now. They all blended together into a distressing limbo. He was left with a lot of self-hatred and revulsion.

And to think that it hadn't finished that night... The back of his eyelids hurt when he remembered how he had never stopped insulting Lena, even when he saw her again.

He shut his eyes tightly, and behind them, he saw Lena's bloodied body lying on the street after being hit by the automobile. A tear fell from his eye, and another one followed. But the warm liquid of pain and regret wasn't enough to wash away the huge amount of guilt that was stuck in his chest.

He was heartbroken thinking about what Lena had to go through, and he was scared that nothing he did would be able to fix the damage.

Kellen abruptly opened his eyes and stared at Selene with a deadly cold look. She continued mumbling stuff that didn't make sense while falling back against the post again. He rushed toward her and grasped her shoulders with such force that they hurt before he could even think. Selene was so stunned that she couldn't even scream when he shook her hard. Her head bounced as she gulped for air and turned pale from all the abrupt motions.

"Why? Why did you...?" Kellen stammered, his eyes clouded with tears of fury and remorse. "How could you...? Damn it!"

Selene didn't seem able to answer the questions Kellen could barely ask.

Kellen finally let her go and took a step back, breathing hard. He made a fist and hit the pillar next to Selene's head with a loud shout. Selene fell down the pillar because she was scared.

"What is the point of now punching into that clueless pillar, Kellen?" Ryan's voice, even while it was mocking, had a hint of anger in it. "Or terrifying that witch?" he said with his eyes, pointing to Selene, who was slumped on the floor.

“Shouldn’t you punch yourself in the face instead? For making Lena go through such hell? For dishonoring her?” Ryan said. “Because you killed your own child!”

Kellen’s head shot up to look at Ryan, and the knuckles that were still pressed on the pillar relaxed. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing and was horrified. His hands became numb on both sides. The last piece of news about this catastrophe felt like a sharp knife cutting through his flesh.

Ryan nodded, his lips pushed together and his eyes flaming hot. “That night she lost her child, she would have died too if Damien hadn’t found her. It’s ironic that a stranger saved her when her own husband didn’t care if she was alive or dead.”

“I guess it’s too soon then. Nine months have to pass. The father—Ryan—had been in touch, right? I saw him here in Velden, too,”

“By the way, is he willingly sharing you with Damien? Or are you cheating on that poor guy, too? Or maybe you’ve grown tired of him, and Damien is your new toy. I heard you’ve been living in Damien’s apartment for a while. Is he good in bed?”

The echo of his own voice hurt him deeply. In a meaningful way, they came back to haunt him.

“Get that bastard thing out of me...”

Everything around Kellen seemed to spin, and he almost fell to his knees right then and there. He wanted to kill himself and end his life, but it was clear that even that wouldn’t bring back what he had wrecked with his own bloody hands. The sin he had done could not be undone.

How had he turned into this monster and done the unspeakable to the woman he loved?

What had he done?

Ryan was correct. Selene had only won because he had let her. He had damaged everything out of envy and rage, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't go back in time. He could never bring their child back or fix Lena's wounded heart. He was the one who caused this tragedy, and he would be damned to burn in it forever.

Lena walked into her flat and locked the door behind her. Since she rushed out of the party, she had been crying nonstop. Even the cab driver had given her worried looks while driving.

The quiet cries grew into muted whimpers as the sense of being completely broken engulfed her from all sides. She had worked so hard to create a strong fortress, but now it was falling apart. Her confidence in fate was as weak as the castle. As her tears grew louder and her breathing became more and more difficult, she clenched her hands at her sides.

The dull aching in her head that had been there all day had slowly changed into the type of agony that felt like a constant, furious stabbing. She groaned and gripped her head, remembering what the doctor had told her to do if something like this happened: contact the hospital emergency room right away.

But at that time, she didn't want to do anything to make the anguish go away. This bodily pain helped dull the sharp pain in her heart.

Lena felt really shattered today, so damaged that she knew she would probably never be able to fix herself again. She searched her heart for a cause to beat but couldn't find one. She also looked for at least one tiny glimmer of hope to grasp onto but couldn't find any.

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She had lost all hope of starting again and keeping her commitment to herself to forget the past and move on. The darkness that was coming eventually wrapped around her like a lot of dirt around a body.

She started to cough violently after taking a difficult breath. The old bitter taste of blood came back to the roof of her tongue and swiftly went down her throat, where she spit up part of the warm crimson liquid. As she inhaled again, blood flowed from her nose as well. She wiped the blood off with her shaking fingers, brought them up to her eyes, and watched with fuzzy vision as one life faded away.

She took faltering steps toward her bedroom, but halfway there, it felt like everything around her was spinning out of control. She leaned against the wall next to her and walked forward, leaning onto the wall for support and leaving a trail of blood behind her.

But her trip was cut short as her hands hit the first set of paintings, the green ones that Damien had put there. When the glass frames broke into hundreds of pieces, they fell to the floor with a huge bang.

After her greens broke, she fell to the ground as well. The many shattered pieces of glass hurt her flesh all over.

She could feel the warmth leaving her slowly, maybe for minutes or hours, until the cold that made her head hurt more than the ache in her brain took over.

She heard her phone ring, blinked her blurry eyes, and her whirling vision centered on the phone that was nearby. If she reached out a bit, she could hold it, and aid

would arrive. Whoever was phoning would know she wasn't feeling well. Her fingers twitched as they started to go for the phone, but suddenly they stopped.

"I can't stand looking at your face anymore. You make me sick, Lena, and all the memories I have of you and you."

"Now go back to your child, Lena, and pay attention to it instead of chasing after my Kellen."

All the hurtful things others had said to her up to that point touched her skin with their frigid fingers. One by one and then all at once. Their quiet words were too tempting to ignore.

A sweet smile of poisonous strength emerged on her lips.

She closed her eyes and allowed herself to fall into a state of semi-consciousness, letting her empty hand lay still next to the phone, which was going crazy. The ringing in her ear got louder and louder, much louder than her phone's ringtone.

A soul can only go through so much.

She had reached her limit and was looking forward to finally putting an end to this sad story.

The police came quickly with an arrest warrant. A female officer put handcuffs on Selene, who looked quite confused. Ryan was engaged in talking to one of the officers he knew personally about the cases he had filed against Selene.

Kellen was so sad and sorry for himself that he didn't even see what was going on

around him. He felt like the sky had split into pieces over his head, and there was nothing he could do about it. It was clear that he had already lost everything, but it was ridiculous that he just now comprehended and subsequently acknowledged it. And sadly, this now looked to be a bit too late.

His own words and actions turned into lethal vines that soon wrapped around his neck and sucked the life out of him.

Suddenly, he felt something inside him. He felt a peculiar type of emotion in his heart that was stronger than the remorse and sorrow he felt. It was a lot like when the vase broke into pieces near his feet before the party. He felt like something dreadful was about to happen, that what had occurred so far wasn't enough, and something was slipping away from him. He had beads of sweat on his forehead.

“Lena—” he exclaimed, suddenly finding his voice and an overwhelming need to get to her.

Ryan, Celeste, the guests, the cops trying to calm down a very intoxicated Selene, and the paramedics working on Isaac Arthur were all in different kinds of frenzies in the background. Kellen couldn't see any of it.

He ran down the corridor like he was in a dream and staggered out the doors. He could hear someone calling his name from far away, but he didn't care about anything else in the world. He jumped into his car and drove it out of the parking lot, making a fast and screaming slide.

His eyelashes felt sticky as he blinked quickly to clear his foggy eyesight while he raced down the street at night like a bat out of hell. He was so eager to get out of the automobile that he almost fell face-first when he saw Lena's flat.

The elevator moved slowly, like a turtle creeping up, and he felt like a confined

animal within the metal box. He rubbed the dried tears on his cheeks and dragged his quivering hands up to his messy hair, stopping himself from hitting the buttons with his fist. But when the elevator finally got him to his destination, and he ran out, he was confronted by something he didn't anticipate.

Lola was banging on Lena's door with a worried look on her face. When she saw Kellen or more like the mess he was in, she took a double take.

But soon, her fear won out over her amazement. And she hastily said something when he looked at her questioningly. "I've been calling her for a while now," she said, showing Lena's number still being called on her phone as she spoke. "She's not answering, and she's not even opening the door! I don't like this, especially when..."

In a haste, Kellen cut her off. "Get out of the way."

Kellen hit the door with his fist a couple of times while Lola retreated away. "Lena! Open the door!" But nothing happened; there was no sound of anything moving inside her apartment. All that could be heard was quiet.

Kellen grimaced, and his stomach fell with fear.

It didn't feel nice. Not at all.

Kellen took a few steps back, then abruptly sprang forward and slammed his shoulder against the door. It broke beneath the attack, and he fell inside.

Everything was really silent, and everything smelled like death. Kellen could hear his heart beating loudly in his throat. It took his eyes a while to get used to the faint light that was undoubtedly emanating from someplace in the living room. He moved forward slowly, looking around. When he heard something crunch under his sneakers, he suddenly stopped. He looked down and saw fragments of broken glass

from a picture frame that had fallen and broken on the floor. His eyes slowly followed the glasses until they stopped on something that made him feel sick with fear.

His heart stopped pumping, and his feet felt like they were locked to the earth and wouldn't move.

He had been scared before, like when he was a child and a stormy night thunder cracked down on a tree right next to his bedroom window while his father was dying. He had also been scared when his bike crashed into a careless car, and he thought he was going to die. There were a lot of people on the list, but none of them could make him feel as panicked as he did now.

He stared in horror at Lena's still body lying among the broken glass fragments. It looked like hundreds of daggers were stabbing his heart at once. Her face looked pale, which was different from the red blood that was flowing from the corners of her lips. He felt sick when he saw the little pool of blood on the floor, along with the scarlet spots of blood that the broken glass shards had made as they pierced her flesh.

He snapped out of his frozen condition when he heard Lola gasp in the background.

He pushed his shaking feet toward Lena, breaking additional pieces of glass beneath his shoe along the way. His brows were twisted in pain. The noise made him feel terrible in every manner, and it was strange how much it sounded like how he felt inside at the time.

Kellen knelt next to Lena, not caring that the glass was stabbing them. He carefully put her upper body on his lap.

"L... Lena," he said, tapping her cheeks softly with shaky fingers to get her to respond. "Lena? Lena! Please open your eyes. Oh God, Lena! No, no, no. Don't.

No!”

He shook her shoulders, begged, sobbed, and begged some more. His tears streamed from his cheeks and hit her forehead.

But this time, she wouldn't listen or answer. She had closed her eyes for a long time, and now she had closed them for good. The tranquility in this darkness was worth a lot more than the violence among the living. It was almost difficult to bring back the soul that had finally found the road to freedom.

He cried out like a crazy person, “What have I done to you, Lena!” “What have I done to us?”

The paramedics had to actually fight Kellen off of Lena's lifeless body. And then Lola, who was swearing, threw a glass of water at his face to get him to calm down. Lola didn't know what Kellen's genuine connection to Lena was or what Lena's background was like. If not, the glass would have probably had acid in it instead of water.

It was like a bad dream that was hard to see after that. He drove to the hospital after the ambulance. Lola offered to drive right away when she saw him shivering. He didn't say anything, but he agreed.

He saw them take Lena away on a trolley with an oxygen mask over half of her face. Her hair was matted, and her skin was pale save for the places of her body that had blood drying on them.

He saw red specks that hurt the back of his eyes.

As nurses rushed to help Lena in the emergency room, a specific doctor showed up at a very fast pace, and Lola started chatting to him right away.

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Kellen was like a ghost in the background, filling out the documents, seeing the blue curtains close over Lena's bed, and listening to the doctor talk.

"We need to do a CT and MRI scan to find out how the tumor in her brain is doing. It looks like the cancerous cells have spread much faster than we thought."

Lola's voice sounded terrified as she said, "Wh... what will happen now?"

"We can only say for sure what we see in the scan results," the doctor said quickly. "The Chemotherapy didn't work. It looks like we've gone past the point where the chemodrugs could have shrunk the tumor. Maybe surgery is the only option now, but only if the CT and MRI scan reports show that the procedure won't put any important part of her brain at risk because that could lead to a coma, paralysis, or even death."

A tumor in her brain. Cells that have cancer. Chemotherapy. Operation. Dead.

It seemed like the world had stopped moving. Virulent words were left behind, floating in the air without gravity, and they kept circling Kellen. They did make sense, but they also didn't.

No. It couldn't be. He must have heard wrong! But even a poor attempt at lame denial failed.

He had been busy hating her and making her life miserable with his arrogance and pathetic self. All this while, she had been going through bloody cancer.

Kellen froze at the desk, right across from where Lena was behind the curtains, and

the nurse had to physically pull the paperwork out of his hands.

He was so angry with himself and how unjust this whole thing was that his hands were clenched at his sides.

It should have been him, not she.

He should have had cancer, not her. Never her. Lena wasn't the sinner; he was. But it was her bleeding on that bed behind the curtains. She was barely breathing and holding on to a weak thread that connected her to life.

Kellen bent down, feeling nauseous. His gut was tight, and he was breathing out hot blasts of air through his nostrils.

He staggered to the bathroom and threw up all he had in his stomach. He continued throwing up, and tears streamed down his nose. It wasn't just because of the bodily pain; it was also because of the pain in his spirit.

Kellen had been staring at the white wall for two long hours when he realized that he had ruined all the colors in his own life. Lena had come into his life like a beautiful rainbow in the sky after a lot of rain. He had turned a beautiful rainbow into dangerous darkness just because he was insecure. He threw away what the skies had given him in the most lively way. He didn't deserve her, yet she picked him and gave him her love.

And what had he done to keep that love alive?

His own soul condemned him all the time since he couldn't think of a single method to make up for his faults.

No. No, what he did wasn't just a mistake. They were wrong.

Not just once or twice. He had gone down that same path of distrust time and again until everything was completely and utterly damaged beyond repair. His child had perished, and now maybe... Lena was also going away.

Lola added, "I called Damien. He's not in the city right now, but he started back right away after hearing about Lena." She gave Kellen glances that were full of doubt. It had been like this since he started sobbing while holding Lena's motionless corpse in the flat. She couldn't be faulted because she still didn't know anything, and Kellen didn't want to tell her that he was Lena's husband yet. He was too embarrassed to say who he was out loud. They were Lena's pals; thus, they must have known about his terrible actions.

Kellen merely nodded in response without saying anything.

Lola's phone rang, so she moved away to answer it. She knew she shouldn't do that near the rooms where tests were being done that involved radiation and other things like that.

Robert, the doctor from earlier, went out the door and looked around before stopping on Kellen.

"Where's that girl who came with Lena?"

Kellen sprang up to his feet with a heavy sensation of fear in his chest. "You can tell me. I'm..." He paused, but he swallowed his humiliation because he needed to know how Lena was. "I'm Lena's husband."

"Her husband?" Dr. Robert stared at Kellen with doubt as he adjusted his spectacles. "Where were you when she came to see me and then when she had her first Chemo? I thought another guy was her boyfriend or something because he was always taking care of her."

Where was he? Kellen grinned with anger. He would have to live with this guilt until he died.

“Anyway,” Dr. Robert said with a brief sigh. “Right away, Lena is going to the ICU. As I thought earlier, the scan reports show that the tumor has grown faster than we thought it would, so we don’t have time to slow down the cancerous cells’ growth with Chemotherapy.”

He frowned and stopped before continuing again. “But what puzzles me the most is that this decline in her health has been a slow process, and it’s clear that she was sick the whole time. I told her after the first Chemo that she needed to call the hospital right away if she felt so bad that it outweighed the side effects of Chemotherapy. But she didn’t, so it must have been a slowly growing headache that got so bad that she bled like that.”

Kellen’s hands felt like ice, and his pulse raced as he listened to the doctor. He understood what the doctor was trying to say. It seemed like it was on purpose. That... It seemed like Lena had been through a lot of agony, kept bleeding, and still didn’t contact the hospital or anybody else for aid.

Her phone was immediately next to her dead corpse, and it was covered in blood!

It had to be on purpose.

And he had pushed her that far. He had pushed her to the edge, and now she had jumped off the cliff.

“We need to do surgery right away because Lena is in a bad way right now.”

Kellen let out a trembling sigh of pain and spoke out, his voice sounding like a croak. “Will she be okay after the operation?”

At that point, he could go down on his knees and beg the doctor or anybody else if it meant saving Lena's life.

"We'll take out as much of the cancerous tissue as we can to keep her condition stable for now." Doctor Robert looked at Kellen with pity but still spoke in a professional way. "But surgeries often go wrong, and it's a fifty-fifty situation when it comes to dealing with grade three malignant brain tumors. I'm not saying you should give up hope, but you should be ready for the worst."

Was the doctor saying that Lena may really die during the surgery? And she would die anyhow if there was no operation!

"We're running out of time, so I need you to sign some papers so we can start the procedure as soon as possible."

Running out of time.

Kellen had never felt so powerless before. He hated feeling like he was disabled because he always wanted to be in charge.

Lola, who had been back for a while and was patiently listening to the doctor's decision, was now crying and resting against the wall. Ryan was running down the hall toward them with a thundering look on his face, and Celeste was running right behind him.

Kellen was so sad that he couldn't pay attention to anything or anybody around him.

He fell back down onto the plastic chair behind him as the doctor left, stating he would mail the forms. A group of nurses quickly rolled a stretcher with Lena on it out the door. In a flash, they were gone from his sight.

Kellen sat still, not knowing that others were staring at him. He could hear voices chanting things he couldn't understand. At one point, he flinched at the sound of distant cries.

He stared at his hands. There was blood on them, Lena's blood. His hands shook, and a chill of fear raced down his spine. He wiped his palms hard on the edge of his shirt to attempt to get rid of all the blood, but it had dried by then and wouldn't come off. He tried, but it didn't work. Kellen looked like his whole life had been taken out of him as he stared at his hands. He looked like a statue that had been frozen in time, beautifully made but full of sadness. But the tears that were streaming down his face conveyed a different story.

Third-Person Point of View

Ryan leaned against the wall and looked away from Kellen, who was a horrible sight. He didn't even look at the man for a second. If it were possible, he would have murdered Kellen with his bare hands in the worst way conceivable at the start. Kellen should have gotten the worst punishment in the world. But now was not the time to ponder about this sad individual; it wasn't worth it. Because Lena was locked in the struggle for survival within the O.T., this was more important. And for the security not to kick him out of the hospital at this important time. The glass doors to the theater were scary yet promising at the same time. Doctors, nurses, and many more patients were always going in and out of them. Ryan's gaze followed everyone and then strayed to what could be seen of the interior through the glass. He had been praying in quiet for the previous three hours.

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Celeste's heart was breaking with remorse. If her son had made a mistake, she did everything she could to make matters worse. Kellen's doubts had started the destruction, and she had added even more poison to it. Celeste maintained her hand on Kellen's shoulder, but he didn't move. Her heart grieved when she saw her son like that, and it cried in regret for not trusting the girl she had previously thought of as a daughter. What type of mom was she? Where was she when her kid really needed her? She had to leave that innocent person behind because she was too obstinate to see.

"Kellen..."

Kellen blinked once, and a few tears fell from his eyes. He didn't try to brush them away. He gently pushed Celeste's hand away from his shoulder while keeping his hand on hers. He didn't glance up at his mother since he thought he didn't deserve any love or comfort. He should have been roasted in the fire he made himself since he was a monster.

It was another hour. And then, all of a sudden, Doctor Robert was coming out.

Ryan stood up straight and hurried up to him. "Doctor?"

Kellen jerked out of his daze and got up right away when he saw that the doctor had come out. He was pushed by Ryan, who seemed quite angry about it, and stood in front of the doctor. "Doctor, how's Lena? Please tell me she's okay," Kellen said in a voice full of fear.

Ryan had also stepped up to stand next to Kellen, waiting with bated breath.

“Why aren’t you saying anything?” Kellen said, his voice shaking with terror as the doctor kept quiet as if he were looking for the right words. “L... Lena’s okay, right?” he mumbled. He was too nervous to ask about Lena since he was afraid of hearing anything that would end everything.

What if he never saw Lena again? What if he never got to hear her speak? What if... No! He didn’t want to worry about the “what ifs” anymore.

Ryan turned his face away in disgust. It was disgusting to see Lena’s so-called criminal husband behave like he cared about her. But things were quite bad, and Ryan held back his need to punch out this difficult man. But then he saw Lola, who was gazing at both Ryan and Kellen in complete perplexity, even though she seemed like she was worried about everything. Someone still didn’t know.

“It’s been a very important surgery,” Doctor Robert said, frowning. “We took out as much of the cancerous tissue as we could, but at some point, we couldn’t go any further because normal brain tissue was getting in the way. And... we lost her pulse for almost a minute, but thankfully, we were able to bring her back to life.”

As the doctor told Kellen more and more, his face turned pale, and every cell in his body went numb.

The doctor said after a short pause, “The next seven hours will be very important for her. If she doesn’t wake up by then—” His lips became a straight, grim line. “Then I’m sorry to say that she might never wake up again. She’ll go into a coma.”

Don’t wake up again...

Go into a coma...

Kellen lost it when the words sank into his head. He became angry and walked

forward. “How dare you say that? You were supposed to fix her!” His eyes were red, and it seemed like he had fully lost his mind by now. The sound of Celeste and Lola crying next to him only made the hell-fire storm in his imagination worse.

The doctor only raised an eyebrow and stayed quiet. It was clear that he had seen family lose it when they heard bad news before.

But Ryan was a different story. It was no longer feasible for him to keep putting up with this annoying condition. He pushed Kellen away from the doctor and lifted his hand to hit him hard in the face. But at the last minute, he pulled back. He looked at Kellen’s face for a long time and noticed that his eyes were full of shame, regret, agony, and dread. The man seemed like he wouldn’t be able to stand up straight for long. Ryan grunted and put a hand in his hair.

What could be worse than this?

Kellen leaned back against the wall behind him and put his hands over his face. He seemed like he was trying to hide from his own gaze. Yes, that was a childish thing to do, but he didn’t know what else to do.

Kellen looked out the glass window in the waiting room before the ICU. Celeste had departed and will be back in a few hours. Her trembling goodbye words were not heard.

Ryan had walked off a while ago, complaining about the cafeteria’s direction. It was easy to surmise why he was upset. The hospital had given them files to fill out, and Kellen had signed all of them when they came with Lena. He had even put his name as the husband on the consent papers for the procedure. Kellen might now be a permanent scarecrow in front of the ICU window, and it would be very hard to get rid

of him. The nurse had thankfully told everyone they couldn't go inside Lena's room; otherwise, some individuals would have had a lot of violent outbursts.

Lola gasped and then snarled, "You're the mother-f*****g husband?!" when she finally understood. And then she said that Kellen had to go, and the protest became futile when the police got involved. It seems that the authorities didn't want to hear about the history but simply the signals in the forms.

After that, Lola marched out with her phone stuck to her ear. Kellen thought that Damien was being told about how things were becoming worse.

Kellen let out a sigh. He was glad he could stay here, near to Lena, while he waited for her to wake up. He didn't know what he would have done otherwise. He knew he didn't belong here, but he had forced that humiliated part of himself to keep silent. He couldn't go anywhere till Lena woke up. If it meant he had to put up with insults from some devoted friends and be told every other minute how unimportant he was on this planet, then so be it. Anyway, everything of that was true.

"I know," he mumbled, looking up at the dark sky. He prayed that morning would burst through the darkness soon and bring back his light. "I know I shouldn't be standing in front of you and asking questions. But I have to ask you questions." Kellen wondered if he was becoming crazy for having a discussion like this. But at that moment, he would have rather gone crazy than see Lena slide away in front of him. "Is it my fault? I'm the monster here. Then why are you punishing her? To this extent?"

He quickly glanced across at Lena, who was sleeping soundly on the white sheets with her head wrapped in white bandages and an oxygen mask over her face. She looked very weak! It broke my heart to see her hooked up to so many pieces of equipment that showed she was alive but also showed how much she wanted to die.

Kellen used the sleeves of his shirt to wipe the tears from his cheeks.

No. In fact, he was the one who was punished here. God was really punishing him by trying to take Lena away in a way that he would never be able to get to her again.

“Please don’t do this. Don’t take her,” he said in a voice that was much lower than a whisper. “Please, I’m begging you. Anything but this!”

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It was like a dream where everything that happened around you was out of your control. Lena felt like she was floating. Her whole body felt both light and heavy at the same moment. There was no more agony or misery, only quick flashes of old events from the past that rushed by her in a whirlwind as she hung there, what seemed to be in the middle of an infinite pit.

There were beeping sounds coming from far away. They reverberated till they turned into a never-ending ringing sound. She heard hurried voices, some of which sounded familiar and some that didn't. People all around her were talking worriedly and, at times, angrily, and no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't figure out what they were saying or where it was coming from. It was hard to understand, and it was quite aggravating when the brief flashes of persons and things, the annoying ringing tone, and the rushing voices yelling things that didn't make sense all mixed together.

She had exhaled in relief when, all of a sudden, everything went quiet. The flashing lights, ringing sounds, and persistent voices faded away as a chill that made her feel numb spread across her body.

A cool air that made him feel uneasy blew over Kellen, and he opened his eyes with a start. He didn't know when he had fallen asleep with his head on the cool glass of the window.

He couldn't put into words the type of terror that crawled up his spine. It completely took over him and his heartbeat in a crazy way inside his chest.

He instinctively turned his head toward the glass that Lena was behind.

That was when it all started. Lena's body started trembling in spasms at the same moment as alarms went off. The equipment connected to her also started making a lot of noise.

He couldn't breathe and felt like his feet were made of lead. A lot of nurses and physicians rushed in. They started working on her right away. Kellen didn't know that when he proceeded with shaky feet toward the open doors, a male nurse pushed him, but the push didn't bother him. His biggest dread was coming true.

He stopped still at the door as he heard the few words that reached his ears. "Her pulse has dropped." "We're losing her."

There, in that frigid, quiet condition of being stuck... The empty space surrounding her was filled with funny light. And it became brighter and brighter until it was so dazzling that it hurt to look at. She would have closed her eyes if she could, but as in dreams, she had to keep staring and waiting for something she didn't know. She saw two faces in the distance, and her heart raced with delight when she recognized them.

"Mom... Dad!"

She felt comfortable and at ease in a way that only parents can give. After a long time, her heart was full of joy, and her lips turned into a real grin.

Kellen had moved a little closer in the middle of all the nurses' work. He could see her face as he looked over the doctor's shoulder. He saw that her lips had extended into a little smile of happiness. He had once loved her grin, but later, he had ruined it. He would die to see her grin again, but right now, seeing it made him feel uneasy.

She was going away from him.

When she saw her parents waving at her and telling her to come to them, she started

to slowly walk toward them, almost as if she were floating in the breeze. She couldn't help but be pulled in; it was like a spell. Her mother raised her hand for her to clasp, and her eyes filled with tears of joy. For the first time in a long time, she felt loved. She wanted to hug her parents and tell them how much she missed them. She wanted to tell her mother how much she missed her lullabies during the hard days she spent alone. Like a kid, she wanted to hold her father's index finger and go away to a place where everything was fine.

As she started to run now, memories of happy times from her youth flooded her mind. Her mother sang to her; she had birthday parties and the first day of school. Lena remembered that hide and seek was her favorite pastime. She used to feel like she had conquered the world as she jumped around the corner where her father liked to hide. She used to yell with joy...

"I found you!"

"We lost her."

Lola cried loudly from the door. Ryan appeared too shocked to do anything while Lola hugged him.

Kellen blinked since the announcement shocked him. He looked at Lena's still body without blinking. The flat line on the heart monitor made him feel like the devil was laughing at him. He could feel arms pushing him back and attempting to get him out of there.

Dr. Robert was next to the bed. He moved his wrist to check the time with a frown on his face. "Time of death..."

"No!" Kellen yelled, and that's when he pulled aside the hands that were pulling him.

"Lena can't die. No."

Dr. Robert turned to the younger doctor with the clipboard, ignoring all the cries but not without a compassionate gaze. Ryan and Lola had gotten closer by then, but they were both too sad to do anything about Kellen, who was still in denial.

At first, Kellen got down on his knees next to the bed and begged her to wake up and open her eyes. But then his voice got angry when he didn't get an answer. And soon, he started to cry hard.

"I swear," he said, his face pushed into Lena's hand as he cried. "I swear I'm going to kill myself, Lena. Please! You can't punish me like this, in any way, but not like this. God damn it, Lena!..."

Ryan snorted from the foot of the bed, "She's gone, Hart," and aggressively wiped away tears from his cheeks. He had this urge for revenge that was seething in his blood. "Why don't you go back and celebrate?"

Kellen glanced up with shock. He shook his head in pain. He had done nothing except push her away from him all these days. And now that she had made the last step away from him, he was abruptly alone and sad, with a big hole in his heart where it used to be. He kissed Lena's icy hand tenderly after bringing it up to his lips. He kissed her, and tears mixed with it. He could hardly see her through the haze, and her soft hands caressed his shaking, wet lips.

She was only a few steps away from them. As the faces became sharper, the overwhelming joy appeared to be a part of her. She could also see a little bundle in her mother's arms now. A little face came out from the beautiful ruffle of the clothes. For a while, it confused her, but then she felt the familiar pain of losing love. Her baby!

A few more steps, and then we'll be there.

But suddenly, it felt like warm liquid was on her fingertips. She raised her hands out of curiosity. It appeared like drips of dew were falling down her hands.

The quiet and peace were replaced by the familiar sounds of a woman's pain, one voice full of anger and another full of hopeless despair.

Things started to change.

The space surrounding her got so much bigger that she stopped feeling like she was flying, and her parents' and baby's beaming faces disappeared. She wanted to yell, "No, don't leave me again!" but the anguish in her head made it impossible.

A beeping sound started somewhere in a steady pattern. She wanted to throw a fit to make the unpleasant sounds stop, but instead, she opened her heavy eyes to see weeping faces and barely understood their shocked looks.

But her gaze traveled past their faces and looked out the window of the room she was in. The first rays of sunlight pierced through the glass and touched her with their warmth. She could have awakened up to see the morning. And she knew she liked it more than rain.

Oh my God!

The patient had returned after three lengthy minutes of flat-lining.

Dr. Robert swayed back and forth on his heels, his hands on his hips and his mouth set in a tight line. He turned his face toward his junior doctor assistant, who had his eyebrows up to his hairline. "That's what I call strange."

Damien ran along the hospital hallway like a crazy person. The concern, fear, and rage that were building up inside him were so strong that they stopped him from

being exhausted from driving for hours last night. Lola had brought him up to speed on everything that had happened since Lena went to the hospital, right up to Kellen's true face.

He didn't get into a vehicle wreck on the way here, which was a miracle. But the speeding fines were a different story.

He couldn't believe that Lena had kept Kellen's true identity as her husband a secret. And the best part was that she'd been working with that jerk the whole time without anybody else knowing.

How much pain she had been in all this time! How awful it must have been for her to witness the jerk hanging about in front of her. Damien could only guess.

And to think that he had her attend meetings with that Kellen!

Damien cursed himself in his head, and then he swore out loud. There, the father of all problems was sitting in a chair.

Damien was furious and upset, so he grabbed Kellen by the collar and dragged him up. He could see people gazing out of the corner of his eye, but before anybody could stop him, he hit Kellen in the face with a hard blow. Damien assumed it would leave a bruise, but it didn't make him feel any better.

But Kellen was really quiet. It looked like someone had cut his throat with a dagger, and it wouldn't have mattered to him. And it made Damien even angrier. He was so angry that he wanted to fight.

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Damien snarled, “So you’re the scoundrel,” still holding Kellen’s collar in his hands. “Do you have any idea how much she had to go through because she loved you? And to think that I didn’t know this all along,” he said, breathing heavily in anger. “Damn, I really want to kill you right now.”

Kellen sighed with discomfort. “Look, I...” but he was cut off right away.

“And you have the guts to talk!”

Damien would have definitely gotten his wish to murder by starting with another round of fists, but someone stopped his rising fist. He turned his head quickly to find that it was a man his own age.

The man said, “Leave him,” with a grim expression and then pointed to the security guys who were running by and looked quite unhappy.

“Who are you?” Damien plainly didn’t like being stopped, but he did anyway.

“Ryan.”

Damien and Ryan were occupied chatting to each other, so Kellen went back toward the wall and slid down it. He was sitting on the floor with his legs out in front of him.

Lena was still in the ICU, but she was now safe and slept again.

He wanted to see her, but Dr. Robert had told all of Lena’s guests that they couldn’t even go to the ICU waiting room, given the trouble they had caused earlier. It looked

like the doctor was disciplining them as they were school students, and he had even put a couple of big guards in front of Lena's room.

Now, they were all crammed into the hallway next to the ICU. At least Ryan and Lola were stuck together, while Kellen got third-degree glares every other minute, and Damien was joined to that glare team. Kellen couldn't blame them, though. They had been there for Lena through thick and thin, even when he squandered time excavating a hole that could have been a grave. He might just as easily climb inside, lie down, and ask Lena's pals to cover him with dirt. He was sure they would be happy to help.

As time went by, Kellen sat on the floor, waiting for Lena to wake up again. Another worry kept creeping into his head. The worry of having to see her again.

Would she ever let him off the hook? Would she ever consider getting back together with him?

The upsetting inquiries made his stomach drop since the responses that came back were quite bad.

The scenario was rather strange. And too much testosterone.

Lola peered at the boys sleeping in the hallway out of the corner of her eye.

Kellen was using his pants to clean the dirt off the floor of the hospital. His clothing was so dirty that you couldn't tell what color they were anymore. There was just too much blood and grime everywhere. Even Dr. Robert gave him a look that screamed, "Zombies are real."

Ryan and then Damien sat in the two chairs next to Kellen. Lola was the next person to sit on the chair, which finished the line of people in need.

Lola let out a loud sigh that made the three men stare at her for a second. But then they went back to being the same robots they had been before.

Strange.

She was worried about Lena, too, but she didn't like staying quiet for so long.

She turned to the side and opened her mouth to say something to Damien, but then she closed it quickly when she saw him glaring at the floor. She was going to go back to how she was before, but then she saw Ryan. And he was staring at her with a raised eyebrow.

Lola hurriedly glanced aside after clearing her throat. Ryan made her anxious. He had previously told her what happened at Kellen's engagement party that went bad. She concluded that Ryan was a touch terrifying because he was so adept at formulating plans like that.

She could still picture the first time they met. Oh, how badly he damaged her knuckles that day. She did hit him, but nevertheless...

She sighed again, and it shook the ground. There was a lot of bad energy behind the faux calm face. Another fight was coming up soon. Lola didn't want to see that happen again. Kellen didn't even try to fight back when Damien tried to hit him. It was just as bad as Lena not calling for aid on purpose when she was bleeding to death in her apartment.

"These guys are all crazy. Thank f**k, I don't have a boyfriend!" she said to herself.

She jerked her head up as someone cleared their throat. Ryan lifted both of his eyebrows and gave her a look of disbelief. He must have heard her talking to herself and thought she was crazy.

She snapped, “What am I supposed to do?” “You guys would rather kill each other than talk.”

“So you decided to talk to yourself?”

Damien sat between them and dragged a hand down his face. Kellen moves his feet around while sitting on the floor.

“Yes!” She lifted her chin.

Lola didn’t care what other people thought. She simply wanted Lena to be like that. She was going to train the girl who was lying half-dead in the ICU to be just like that when she woke up.

There is a limit to how long you can grieve over things that can’t be altered.

Ryan had a glimmer of a smirk on his lips as he said, “Are you always like this?”

Lola squinted her eyes. He was laughing at her, the fucker. A nurse immediately ran out of the ICU section and yelled for the doctor before she could say something really rude. Dr. Robert, his assistant, and a number of nurses quickly came racing.

Everyone in line for their sadness got up.

Lola tried to advance to see what was going on, but three frantic guys shoved her back and made it impossible for her to move further. “What the hell!”

Dr. Robert came out alone with a smile on his face and said, “She’s awake.”

Lola felt like a big stone had been taken off her chest as she heard the news. She walked to the side just in time to see Kellen's relief countenance. Ryan and Damien also looked the same.

But as soon as Dr. Robert left and told them they could meet Lena immediately, but only one at a time, the scenario altered.

Ryan and Damien stopped Kellen from going inside just as he was about to. "Hey, hey, hey! Where do you think you're going?"

Lola stopped herself from groaning. There they go again! "Uh, guys, excuse me, let the girl go by?" But they didn't.

Kellen shut his eyes for a second before letting out a sigh. "Let me in."

Ryan laughed. "No way in hell."

Lola tried again, this time stepping back and strolling around Kellen to see if she could get in from the other side. "Guys, while you think about who can go in or not, let me just..."

At this moment, Kellen was in a lot of trouble. "Hey, I need to talk to her."

"Not over my dead body," Damien said fiercely.

Kellen looked annoyed and tried to push past the two men, but they pushed him back hard.

Lola, on the other hand, practically fell on her b**t as the boys locked their horns.

"Everyone back off!" she suddenly yelled, striking Ryan's shoulder with her fist. She

wincing back; that guy was all lead. Damn it!

She was able to get the attention of all three males, thank goodness. She put her hands on her hips. “Until each of you gets your act together, no one should go in that room,” she said, pointing to the door. “Over there, Lena just got away from the Grim Reaper, and you guys are fighting among yourselves! You should be ashamed of yourselves.”

She was happy to see them shift their weight and seem ashamed. Idiots! They were glad she didn’t have her favorite knife with her just then.

“And you,” she said, turning to Kellen. “Don’t you think you should come back later when Lena is more stable? She just woke up, for f**k’s sake!”

Ryan complained. “Later? He shouldn’t even come back later!”

Lola now looked at Ryan with a scowl. “How about we let Lena make that choice?”

Then, she pushed past them without being too kind. Mission Lena was waiting ahead.

Lena’s first thought when she woke up was how heavy her eyes felt. The light flowing in through the window was like it was getting past her closed eyes. Knowing that light existed and experiencing it were both very unpleasant. Her head hurt, but then someone fumbled with her arm, and soon, the pain turned into a numbness that she couldn’t figure out.

After several futile tries and a lot of groaning, she finally opened her eyes a little bit.

A man with a sickeningly happy smile looked at her through a pair of unclear spectacles.

She recognized the face. She slid her gaze slowly down to see the white jacket on his

torso and the stethoscope around his neck. A physician. Oh... Dr. Robert.

The guy questioned Lena slowly, as if she were a stupid kid, “How are you feeling?”

Lena opened her lips to say something, but all that came out was a strange scream. Suddenly, a nurse came out of nowhere with a cup and put the straw from it to her lips. Dr. Robert rubbed his beardy jaw while she avidly drank from it.

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Her head spun back. She remembered the times she was sad in her apartment as she lay there with a sick sense of contentment, knowing that life was slipping away. It made her cringe now. Then she saw her parents and her kid, who was her heaven, in a blurry way. No matter what it was—a final dream, a trick her mind played on her, or the truth of death—the recollection of it seemed to help her now. She appeared to get a burst of vigor from a remembrance of something that most people would call an illusion. It was like she had found her safe place, and it had given her the uncommon promise of kindness. She had spotted Kellen next to her bed when she woke up, and she had seen Lola, Damien, and Ryan. It was their voices and emotions that brought her back.

Dr. Robert remarked, “I hope you’re not thinking this is the afterlife?” It was hard to tell if he was serious or simply joking. “My last patient did that after I punched him out of a coma. It was funny until he begged for mercy.”

“My head feels scary,” Lena said in a hoarse voice.

“Yes, it is,” Dr. Robert responded in response. Then he asked her about her health, memory, and some light motions of her fingers and toes. He was busy writing things down on pieces of paper on a clipboard.

After Dr. Robert was happy and departed with his troop, Selene came in and has been threatening and angry with Lena ever since.

Lola hit Lena on the arm again and said, “You’re bad.” “You’re really bad!”

Lena murmured, “Ow,” when Lola hit her on purpose with a mild blow.

Lola's nose was stained from the few tears she had shed after going in. "How dare you pull this stunt? No, for not pulling any stunt?" she said. "It was like the nasty grim reaper came for you, and you served yourself on a silver platter! Is this what you've learned from me after so many f*****g months of being friends? Not done, Lena, not done at all."

Lena groaned and shut her eyes for a while out of shame and regret. "I always choose the easier ways out, don't I?"

By now, it would have been a universal fact.

Lola huffed and made her mouth into a narrow line. She didn't say anything for a long time before she spoke again. "And that's why Dr. Robert has you in counseling. Apparently, girl, you're a sad puppy that needs some weird person for—" she said, twisting her hands about. "Training for the potty."

Lena's mouth turned into a faint but happy smile. Her arms and legs felt heavy because of all the medications that were being forced into her body, yet she still took the time to pat Selene's hand, which was on the bed. "You talk dirty, Lola, and I'm glad you do."

Lola's face seemed angry until she heard Lena say it. Then, the corner of her mouth turned into a crooked smile.

Lena started to doze off again as the weight of her brush with death began to wear her down. After that, she went outside for a few hours, maybe longer, and fell into a deep, colorless sleep. She heard them talking about the revelation at the party and Selene from a distance and once quite clearly. When she finally woke up fully, she put the pieces together. In the empty, peaceful hospital room, she lay alone and let out a deep sigh of relief.

But she knew she had missed a really dramatic show.

Ryan arrived in just as the nurse was leaving after giving her the first dosage of medicine for the day.

At that point, Lena was feeling a lot better. Still sleepy but better and certainly awake.

“So, it was Selene all along, huh?” Her voice sounded hoarse. She took a nervous breath and then closed her eyes for a time.

Ryan nodded. “Now she’s safely in police custody and will be waiting for the day when she’ll be in court,” he said with an angry grunt at the end. “I made sure of it.”

How could one lady have so much poison? Lena thought about it with revulsion.

Selene was ill. She had stolen her baby away from her and made her life a terrible nightmare. And now Lena would make sure that Selene was punished for what she had done wrong. Ryan added that the police would collect her statement and that she would have to be in court. Lena was excited.

Lena’s eyes hurt, but she was able to keep the tears from falling. She didn’t think Dr. Robert had mixed in any anti-depressants, so it might have been the pills or the strange new vigor she felt inside her after this near-death experience.

The news that Kellen finally believed the truth made her feel a lot better, but she realized that was all she felt. She was glad with the change, although it wasn’t anything special. The fact was that she didn’t know how she should feel about it.

“I leave for a few days, and this is what happens. You scared me, Lena,” Damien said with a sad look on his face as he sat on the stool next to her bed. “Think about how I felt when I heard from Lola and how she told me in great detail how you came back

from the dead!”

Lena bit her lip. As each of her friends came to see her, the guilt in her b****t became worse. “Damien—”

He stopped her off, as if he couldn’t hear her, and said, “And to hear that you didn’t call for help on purpose while you were... while you were... Damn it!”

Finally, her eyes filled up. “I’m so sorry! I know I’m a bad person. I should have been grateful for the friends I have who are so dedicated to me and help me more than they need to. But what do I do in return? I look for the easiest ways to get away instead of standing up and fighting!”

Damien took a deep breath and ran his fingers through his hair. “You need to know, Lena, that you’ll always have me—us,” he said, pausing for a while before continuing. “Things aren’t as bad as you think they are. There is light, but you don’t want to see it.”

Lena didn’t say anything and sighed in relief as Damien bent over her on the bed and gave her a side hug. Damien sat still, tired of the lines that were stuck to her hands and the gauze that wrapped her head. That hug was a touch strange, but if anybody could make strange feel great, it had to be Damien. He really picked her up off the street and didn’t simply drop her off at the hospital and be done with his ten seconds of generosity. He went above and above to assist her to start a new life in a new city. Damien had really saved her life.

“Did they really shave off all my hair?” Lena murmured a little bit later.

Damien looked sorrowful when he lifted his head up. “Don’t worry; they’ll grow back.”

Lena forced a grin and said, “Will they grow back blue?” She thought of a youngster named “Dala.” She thought about whether or not she was still in the hospital. If she was, Lena may come to see her.

Damien raised an eyebrow in disbelief. “I guess the pills are talking.”

“Yes, the blue ones,” Lena said, and her body shook with laughter. But then she moaned and stopped talking because it made the awful numbness in her brain feel strange.

Damien kept frowning, but he was careful.

Lena basically slept during the day that went by. And whenever she woke up, one of her pals was always sitting next to her and watching her like a hawk. After a lot of poking and prodding, Dr. Robert said she could move to a room since she was healthy enough. Her three pals yelled from the door.

Selene wrapped her slender arms around Damien and Ryan on either side of her and pulled them down to her height for a group hug. Damien and Ryan choked as their necks were squeezed.

Lena smiled back at the nurse and watched as she put a new bag of saline on the stand and some medications on the bedside table. The nurse told Lena that they would change the bandage on her head in an hour and then leave. Lena moved her body a little from her slightly propped-up bed. She grinned to herself as she looked at her pals, who were all snoozing.

Damien was in the center with his lips open a little and his head leaning back on the backrest. Damien had Ryan and Lola’s heads on his shoulders from both sides. Lola

drooling on Damien's shirt was funny.

Lena let out a sigh.

She begged them to go home now that she was said to be fully okay. But no one paid attention to her. Lena felt even more guilty because of how much they cared about her. The sensation of belonging that was starting to take over everything else in her heart was also growing.

The sound of the door opening drew her attention away from her sleeping buddies. She was having trouble moving her head quickly, so it took her a long time to turn her head toward the entrance.

Celeste strolled in carefully.

Lena's breath stopped for a second there.

She remembered the last time she saw the woman. During their final chat, the once-motherly woman appeared like nothing more than a cruel enemy.

Celeste looked uneasy as she stood next to Lena's bed, unsure of what to do. She was right next to the stool, but it looked like she didn't know if she should sit down.

They were quiet for a long time, and the only sound was the constant snoring in the background.

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Celeste looked up at the couch and then back at Lena. “Ah...,” she said with a stammer. “The nurse told me that you’re okay now?”

Lena wasn’t sure if someone was asking her about her health or telling her about it. “Yes,” she said, and that was enough for her.

A few more seconds of stillness went by before Celeste eventually sat down on the stool, looking strangely tired. “Lena, I know how I’ve treated you—how we’ve treated you—I and Kellen, it was so utterly awful. I can’t explain how much I’m regretting it all. And I can see how Alexis is devastated with remorse. It was a conspiracy well planned; it was a misunderstanding alright, but we should have given you at least the benefit of the doubt.”

Lena was peaceful and calm. But her heart was another story. It was a good thing that she had been taken off the heart monitor a while ago since she could really feel it pounding inside her chest.

“I know I’m asking a lot of you,” Celeste said, her eyes filling with real sadness. “And I’m sorry for asking you this, Lena. But can you ever forgive me? Can you ever forgive Kellen?”

Celeste nearly begged Lena to be motionless and silent, sniffing. She murmured, “Even God forgives a sinner...” as she twisted her hands.

Of course. Lena knew that Celeste was quite devout in a traditional way. The woman had never missed a Sunday church, and she had fasted every day throughout Lent, no matter what. So, it wasn’t strange that God became involved in this mess. Lena could

now see why Celeste was so rigorous with her religion: she was terrified. It wasn't a horrible thing, but it couldn't be the finest thing either.

Lena responded, "But I'm not God." "I'm just Lena."

She didn't have the strength to do what was being demanded of her just now. And since she woke up, she had learned that she had a long way to go and that she needed to forgive herself first for the wrongs she knew she had done to herself and to the others who had put up with her messed up, depressed self for so long.

Celeste nodded in agreement, even though tears were flowing down her cheeks.

Lena's gaze abruptly moved over Celeste's head, and when she saw the sad figure standing at the half-open door, she froze. She thought it was Kellen, but at the same time, she didn't.

Kellen stood there looking at Lena through the half-open door. He felt his pulse race when he saw how pale she still was. Her skin hue was virtually the same as the bandage over her head and the blankets that were drawn up to her chest. He saw that she was too slender. Her cheekbones had sunk in a little, and her eyes looked tired.

He stood there watching, listening, and hoping against all hope while his mother chatted to Lena. He looked at her with desire and then with sorrow. At that moment, all he wanted was to hold her tightly and never let her go. But he was aware that it wasn't that simple. It would never be simple.

Kellen had to bite the inside of his cheek when Celeste spoke the word God. He shook his head in his mind at that.

"But I'm not God. I'm just Lena."

Hearing her made his breath catch in his throat. She was only Lena, and she meant everything to him.

He tensed as her eyes met his after a time. He was too scared to let out the air he had been holding when she saw him.

Celeste said something quietly to Lena and patted her hand. Then she turned around to go. As she walked past him, she gazed at him for a moment. It was just a sad, empty sight. There was a profound feeling of sadness.

When he stepped in carefully, taking slow steps, Lena had glanced away. He knew she was still quite aware of him, even if she was just looking up at the ceiling. He could tell, maybe because her shoulders grew stiff or because her hands curled around a clutch of the bed sheet.

“L... Lena?” he mumbled in dread, holding on to the small amount of hope that was still alive in him. The hope that she would forgive him and that he would be able to hold his world in his arms again.

But suddenly, that last amount of optimism he had started to fade.

His finger came out to brush her cheek because he was greedy and couldn't help himself. Lena took a deep breath and shifted her face to the other side, as if just seeing him bothered her or touching him would burn her. And he knew that there was nothing unexpected about how much she hated him. It hurt his soul. He had said and done enough to get her to this point, which was far away from him.

Was there any way to take back anything he had said?

Was there a way to take back what he had done?

He pulled his hand back and pushed it into his hair. One tear fell from his eye.

“Lena,” he croaked, hoping against hope that things might be fixed somehow. “I’m... so sorry—”

“Please go,” Lena said, cutting in and breathing hard. Her face was still turned away from him, and her voice was so low that it seemed like she was trying to hold back a sigh.

His stomach turned.

He sat down on the stool and grasped her hand with both of his, like a dying man holding on to what was keeping him alive. “Please, Lena.”

Her fingers moved about in his palms as she weakly tried to pull away from him. And then she immediately relaxed. She blinked a lot with tears in her eyes that she didn’t spill. She still didn’t look at him. She was still stiff since he was there. “I can’t,” she continued, and this time, her voice sounded terrified and urgent. “You need to know that I can’t. Please go.”

He felt like all of his power, hope, and light had left his heart. She slipped out of his fists like sand when he released his grip.

She let out a shattering sigh only when she heard him go. She diverted her eyes to the sofa where Ryan, Damien, and Lola had been sleeping because the stillness seemed wrong. She was the only one who knew that they were no longer sleeping and were now awake and looked at her with blank looks on their faces.

Lena moaned. “What?”

Lola snorted. “You could have done better.”

“Better?”

“Yeah, just punch him in the nose and get it over with. But I know you’re probably feeling weak from the surgery and all the medicine. In that case, we can sneak up on Kellen later, and you can punch him then.”

Ryan instantly started stroking his own jaw like he was thinking of a punch that a certain woman had given him in the past.

Lena sat silent as her pals fought over how to throw punches and how to do it so that the other person would be hurt a lot. She lost her focus. She thought about Kellen again. She couldn’t stop thinking about the sorrow in his eyes and the shame and regret she had seen there in those brief minutes. She had turned aside because she was afraid she would get weak. It was because she used to adore him. She loved him so much that when he pushed her away, it broke her heart in the worst manner conceivable. Her heart was still crushed inside her chest, and the cruel feeling of love hurt. She was afraid that if she looked at his eyes again, she would become putty in his hands again, and she couldn’t let that happen.

How much she loved Kellen was all-consuming, and one day, it would destroy her. It was a terrifying place.

She didn’t want to go back there. She didn’t want to have to think about just one person all the time.

She knew and could easily see that Kellen was just as much a victim of Selene’s plan as she was. But it wasn’t Selene who had put those cruel, degrading words in his mouth. He had been talking the whole time. Selene had been in charge, and Kellen had readily let her. They had set the fire to burn Lena, but she was embarrassed that it had been so easy for her.

Even though his apology seemed real, she couldn't bring herself to talk about the hurtful past and let him off the hook. Not yet. Until she could find herself again.

Even though it made sense for her to forgive Kellen now that he was feeling guilty, her heart had already created the barricades.

How could she not think about the darkest times in her life when she looked at Kellen? There was no way that could happen.

Lena let out a sigh. And only then did she realize that her temples were damp with tears that had not been heard. She wiped them away because she was afraid the other three people in the room would see. They were sick of watching her weep, and after the previous time, she didn't want them to see her cry again. She was mortified that people would believe she was the weakest of all weaklings, even though she hadn't done anything to show them wrong.

But as she took her hand away from her face and looked up, she saw that Damien was looking at her very closely. When she bit her bottom lip, he grinned just a little and gazed at her knowingly as if he knew she was shy of being discovered. Ryan and Lola were too busy arguing over the extremely bad subject of correct punching techniques to notice. Damien was nice, but Lena knew that the other two would have hit her hard on her already broken head.

Lena was able to obtain her promised guards to go home, clean up, and have a good meal after a few hours. They had agreed, but they had also made it clear that at least one of them would always be with her. Ryan had volunteered for the first round, but Lola had given him a warning scowl before she departed with Damien.

Ryan said a minute later, "That woman is f*****g crazy," as he pressed a button on the bed's remote to raise the upper half of the bed.

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Lena grumbled in satisfaction since she was sitting in a more comfortable posture. Her back felt better. “I know, but I wouldn’t change it for anything. The world needs more crazy people like her.”

Ryan didn’t say anything. He proceeded to give her the tablet the nurse had told him to give her half an hour before lunch. Lena saw Ryan moving his feet as she took it down with a drink of water. He seemed a bit tired. “You want to say something to me.”

He groaned in defeat and said, “No.” “Yes.”

Lena turned her head to the side and waited. Whatever it was, she could tell it was bad.

“Earlier, you and Kellen...” He stopped for a second, seeming displeased, and Lena froze. “He said he was sorry and all that. Are you going to forgive him, Lena? After everything he did?”

Lena spoke out after a lengthy pause.

“Ryan, first tell me if you can forgive me for what I did.”

“What will I forgive you for?” Ryan’s forehead crinkled in a grimace of complete uncertainty.

“Because I don’t trust you,” she said with a sigh. “I went to yours that night after,” she said, stopping for a moment since she didn’t want to talk about the terrible thing

that happened again.

Ryan nodded, and his scowl went away, but a shadow of melancholy swiftly took its place. “I know. I saw the pictures.”

“I heard you talk on the phone. I heard half of what you said, and I thought the worst,” she said, her voice breaking for a second. “I heard about the gift you sent and how excited you were that Kellen would get jealous. I thought you were the one who stabbed me in the back. Even though we have been friends for a long time, I believe you sent those photos. And I left! Can you forgive me for that?”

Ryan was shocked. He recovered his voice, what felt like hours later, although it was only a few minutes. “It’s not the same, Lena,” he murmured quietly, glancing down at his hands.

“Isn’t it?” Lena questioned in the same way.

They both looked out the window that was open across the room. For a long time, they didn’t say anything.

Ryan finally said, “Well, I guess I’m a hypocrite, Lena.” He thought for a moment before speaking again. “Selene made a forest fire through Kellen, and I could be a source of fuel for it. It’s a global truth that Kellen was possessive and insecure about you, even though he always acted confident. I’m ashamed and guilty that I used to enjoy seeing him burn with jealousy when he saw me with you. Sometimes, I did it on purpose. I was so used to getting a good laugh when he acted like a madman and took you away from me. It was funny until it wasn’t anymore...”

Lena sat still.

After that, Ryan didn’t say anything for a long time. At one time, the stillness was too

much for him, and he said her name. “Lena...”

“All of us are imperfect freaks, aren’t we?” She kept her eyes on the window, but her thoughts were elsewhere.

Ryan agreed, “We are.”

“And when we break things, they can be fixed, but they’ll never be the same again,” Lena added with a smile as she turned to Ryan again.

It was one of those times when invisible spirits cried “Amen” from all around.

Ryan used to be Lena’s best buddy. But when tragedy struck like a ninja, the bond fell apart, and the gap increased. Ryan came back, and their relationship grew anew, yet the past was still there. Ryan had to share the location he thought was only for him... with Lola and Damien.

She had always loved Kellen, but so much had happened by this point that even forgiving him would never make things the same again.

The pace has been broken a long time ago.

It was time for the new, too.

When Kellen walked back out of the room, it felt like death would have been better than this. He left, just like Lena desired, and didn’t stop until he got to the small botanical garden on the side of the floor. He sat down on the seat next to a long line of Laelia orchids and put his head in his quivering hands. Kellen was completely unaware of the beauty and scent around him, unlike a few pregnant ladies and an old

man in a wheelchair who was paralyzed.

His palms were damp on his cheek. He understood that they had gathered his tears.

His breath caught as he thought back to what had just happened. He couldn't help but think about how Lena would have felt when he pushed her face away from her begging eyes that night.

If possible, his remorse simply grew, and he was afraid that this pain would never end. Because if it didn't, it was extremely likely that one day, all he would have left in his life would be this pain. He was afraid. He felt afraid, like a youngster who had lost their way. The thought that no one may locate him made it even worse. He had lost his world and had nowhere else to go.

As the minutes went by, he slowly became aware of what was going on around him.

A couple that was expecting was talking quietly to their child on the opposite side of the orchids. This was the most peaceful vista there was.

Kellen could sense the excitement, happiness, and love in their voices. He felt like he had lost everything, and it was like another horrible nail in his heart.

There was a flash of lightning in the sky, and then there was a loud boom of thunder.

Kellen heard the man on the other side of the orchids laugh and remark, "That's Velden. You never know when the cloud will take the sky."

The woman's voice laughed, too. "Come on, let's go inside before our little one kicks me in the face because she's scared of thunder."

"Like mother, like daughter."

The pair who couldn't be seen departed, and the woman was out of breath. Then the rain started. Others, too, fled in a rush. Some, though, kept close to the double doors under the shed.

Only Kellen stayed where he was, looking up at the icy drops of heaven. He let the rain fall along with his agony.

Lola laughed behind Lena for the fourth time as she pushed the wheelchair down the hall. Lena rolled her eyes or tried really hard to do it.

"Pushing this damned thing makes me feel like I'm at the store. But there's a person inside the cart," Lola said.

Ryan and Damien had gone home, so it was Lola's time to take care of Lena. And she was turning out to be a really eager babysitter. With Lena's life danger out of the way, Lola was able to focus on all the fun things at the hospital.

Finding Dana at the hospital wasn't hard. The nurse at the counter helped with it. Lena toyed with the petals of the baby pink flowers on her lap as Lola recounted how the nurse told her to push the wheelchair into Dana's room. The sky blue thin ribbons that held the cluster of flowers together looked great with the pink. "This color looks good on you, Lola. Did you get these from the flower shop across the street?"

"Yes, that's the shop. They have an amazing selection of flowers, you know," Lola said with a smile. "And their business is doing well; the line of customers was THIS long. It was a smart move to open the shop right next to a hospital. It was a sure thing that it would be a success. Damien picked out the color, ribbons, and roses, or I was very interested in buying the Dracula Simia Orchids."

"Dracula ah—Orchids?"

“Yeah, damn, it looked like the faces of Count Dracula were pasted on each one of them! That’s interesting. I almost bought them.”

Lena was glad that Damien stopped it from happening. Dracula—whatever Orchids didn’t seem like the right flowers to give to a four- or five-year-old with cancer.

When they got to Dana’s room, Lena didn’t see what she thought she would see.

Dana’s weak body was lying on the hospital bed. Her face appeared dried out, and her eyes were buried deep into what seemed like enormous pain. She looked sickly pale, but as she glanced up at Lena, her eyes lit up like nothing was wrong. Her energy was as bright as a new day. “It’s you!” Dana tried to scream, but all that came out was a shaky voice. “They took your hail too.”

Lena grinned. “Yes, I guess they did.” Her head was still bandaged, but it was clear that there was nothing but pierced skin behind it.

There was a teddy bear on one side of the bed, and on the other side, a couple who seemed worried sat on a chair and a stool. It wasn’t hard to figure out that they were Dana’s parents. It took Dana a good several minutes to introduce them to Lena. She even pointed to the bump on the sofa that was covered by a thin blanket. “That’s my brother, Lanky—”

“It’s Tony,” Dana’s dad said, gazing at Lena and then beaming down at his daughter.

“Yes, that too,” Dana said, brushing off the correction like it didn’t matter. “Miss Lena, he’s magical. The doctor said that Lanky has magic stuff inside the long bone in his back, and some of it he’s going to give me so that my illness goes away. Do you like those flowers? I love pink!”

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Lena noticed that she was still sitting there with the roses on her lap like an idiot. Lola helped Lena lean over a little so she could give them to Dana, who smiled with tired, half-closed eyes.

This poor little girl, who had just started her life, was going through something that broke my heart.

Lena sometimes thought about what God's point was. Some individuals have a hard time from the very beginning of their life, while others are showered with happiness and pleasure all the way through. How does heaven know who to offer what? Some individuals are born without arms or legs, while some are born with a lot of money, power, and comfort. How does this system really work?

A little while later, Lena and Lola stepped out of the room, and Dana's mother, Bella, followed them. In the hallway, they halted in front of the door. Bella said, "She's getting worse." "Apparently, chemo isn't working anymore. The doctors said that a bone marrow transplant is the only option left now," she began, then stopped to sigh. "Thank goodness my older son was the best match of all our family members."

Lena could hear the terror in Bella's voice. It was the worst kind of motherly anxiety. Lena could feel the fear since she had lost a child before. "Don't worry. Everything will be fine. All of our prayers are with her."

Bella wiped the shine out of her eyes and smiled as she nodded.

At that time, Lola chose to hit Lena on the shoulder. "Or if something goes wrong, call us. We've gotten pretty good at scaring death away. For example, we have a

resurrection case here, see?"

"Resurrection case?" Bella looked confused, and Lena pushed her lips together tightly.

Lena was worried that Lola would be able to accomplish the exact opposite of everything Lena was trying to do to make things better.

Lena added, "It's a dramatic story, actually." "Let's not talk about this."

When a fight broke out at the nurses' counter at the end of the hall, the issue was quickly dropped. The speakers yelled, "Code Blue!"

The three ladies stood back and watched as nurses and physicians rushed in and out of the room adjacent to Dana's. They stormed left a little while later, pushing a bed and a patient who was having a seizure in the worst way possible.

"It's a teenager who tried to kill himself several times. I heard the nurses talking about it," Bella said as the noise died down. "It's awful how some people fight tooth and nail to stay alive while others are so desperate to end it. Fate is a cruel joke, and it's not fair."

Lena's brows came together in profound thinking and agreement that made her cringe.

In the evening, you could hear clouds crying in the distance. The darkness that came after sunset and the shadows of a storm that was slowly coming made it look like it was the late hours of the night.

Damien looked out the window, then shut it tightly when a chilly breeze hit his face. He complained and wiped his face with his fingers to get rid of the little drops of

water that the wind had brought with it. “The light rain before was just a warm-up. Now the storm is here.”

Lena moved the spoon in a circle inside the mild soup that was her dinner.

“You have to finish the whole thing,” Damien said as he sat back down on the stool.

“I don’t think I can take any more of this,” she said, making a face and looking up to find Damien frowning at her.

His face was serious as he replied, “You said the same thing at lunch.” “At this rate, you’ll leave this hospital as a living skeleton.”

Lena attempted to seem serious, but in the end, the corner of her mouth turned up into a grin. “The picture in my head is interesting.”

Damien lifted a brow. “That’s it. You’re going to finish that soup.”

Lena was upset and placed a mouthful of the tasteless liquid in her mouth. She looked to be putting forth a lot of effort as she swallowed it down, holding her breath the whole time.

Damien replied, “I’ve made a decision about something, Lena.” He rolled his thumbs around each other and seemed a bit uncertain. “I want to run my boutiques on my own more.”

“Aren’t you already running the business on your own?” Lena said as she chewed on what tasted like mushy carrots.

“Yes, but not completely. I mean, I buy things from top designers and fashion companies. The whole Kellen case that now makes me want to depend on no one but

the people I can trust,” he said as he ruffled his hair and let out a breath while trying to find the right words to say what he felt. “I want to rebuild my business from the ground up so that it can stand on its own.”

“What are you trying to say?” she now understood what Damien meant. But that also meant that more questions came up.

“We’re not just going to sell clothes; we’re also going to make them.”

A lightning bolt hit someplace.

Lena stopped. It was a really strange thought. And that was going to be a big risk.

Damien groaned, “I know,” but he smiled nevertheless at Lena’s stillness. “It sounds scary.”

Lena nodded and said, “It does.”

“But let’s remember that most of my workers are already very good at making things by hand. For example, Macy from our other branch gave us knitted sweaters for Christmas, and Vienna showed us the lace and beads nightgown she made.”

Lena picked up from there, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “Even our Lola can sew designs over shawls. The boring batch we got last month? She was the one who kept those shawls lively by sewing intricate patterns all over them. They sold like antiques!”

Damien’s smile was full of joy. “That’s what I’m talking about. But we still need more workers. We could even hire students who are interested in fashion design and

sewing. Making things by hand can also be very profitable.” Damien’s smile became even wider as he looked down. “And I see that there’s no more of that awful soup.”

Lena looked down, and there was really nothing left in the dish. She let out a wheezy laugh that delighted her. She didn’t even know it.

It’s very strange how things can be so easy when you’re among other individuals.

A lot of different sorts and colors of flowers filled one corner of Lena’s room, making her feel like she was in a garden. There were baskets of fruit and packages of chocolate on the table, and Lola gleefully ate them every time someone left.

The amount of people who were rushing to the hospital to see Lena was too much. Her coworkers from the store had been by in the morning, and their real concern for her and warmth made her feel good. But what really made her heart skip a few beats with joy and excitement was when Mother Gwen walked in with a babbling Dave in her arms. She was also with two of their sisters and a few other kids who had become very close to Lena and were desperate to see her because they heard she was sick.

“Hey there, little one!” Lena said softly but swiftly, removing Dave from Gwen.

Gwen remarked, “I thought you would love to see him.”

Lena agreed with the youngster, “You thought absolutely right.” She didn’t turn away from Dave as the boy held on to her hospital gown as soon as she picked him up. His happy eyes looked up and landed on Lena’s face with a look of awe.

Lena exhaled and closed her eyes for a moment in happiness.

There was no question about it. Dave made her feel whole, but only if she could have him forever and feel this way forever.

Lola's voice flowed across the room as she laughed in astonishment and love. "There, Lena's got her favorite boy."

She rested her temple on Dave's head and gazed across at Lola. She couldn't help but grin a little when she saw Lola giving chocolates to the youngsters who arrived with the sisters. Of course, they didn't say no. They shyly collected a handful of their favorite stuff and strolled up to Lena's bed. And then, right once, people started asking her about the bandage on her head and when her bad fever would go away. Lena addressed their questions with compassion and chuckled when they were unsure. Their foreheads would become charming tiny frowns.

Being with kids can really heal them and bring them back to life in a way that medication can't.

Lena felt better as Mother Gwen left with her battalion, promising to come back the next day. It was hard for her to say goodbye to Dave, but she told herself that she would see him again soon.

She still had little possibility of adopting Dave since she was sick. But she didn't let her dream die yet.

A lot of the time, miracles happen. Lola said that the fact that she was a resurrection case was the best proof ever, right? She wasn't the first one who came back to life after being flat-lining for a long time, but since it was her life, her extremely scary life, it seemed like a unique miracle. Lena had been having bad luck for so long that she was used to receiving the burnt side of the cake most of the time. So now, even the smallest piece of luck made her freeze in astonishment.

There was another notion that often made her stop in her tracks. She wasn't sure what to make of it. It was more like a part of her existence that she was starting to understand she couldn't put off for long. She would have to deal with Kellen at some

point. But her mixed feelings made her want that time to arrive later.

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But knowing that person was always waiting outside her room didn't help at all. The nurse had been telling Lena, things like an enthusiastic spy.

After that day, Kellen didn't try to get inside her room again when she didn't want to talk to him. Instead, he came every day and sat outside her room during visiting hours, which annoyed Lola and Ryan. Lena noted, nevertheless, that Damien had become indifferent to Kellen's presence for some reason.

Lena wanted to talk to Damien and find out what was wrong if anything, but Damien always opted to ignore Kellen, who was a difficult topic for some reason. Then, she would change the subject to make things more comfortable again.

She had just finished her boring lunch that afternoon and was proud of herself for not throwing up once. At that point, the nurse came in with a bouquet of calla lilies and sparkling eyes.

"Look," the nurse said, dropping her voice as if she were telling a secret. She pointed to the bouquet and said, "The guy who sits outside your room every day asked me to give this to you." "But I know you don't like him, so if you don't want to keep it, I'll just go back and give it back to him."

Kellen.

Lena let out a low sigh.

She remembered the days when he used to bring her this similar flower. Those were beautiful, love-filled days. Kellen used to tell her that she was as pretty as flowers.

Easy and straightforward. Kellen liked things simple, and maybe that's why he lost his cool so quickly when things got difficult.

Lena's recollections were broken by the door's loud noise as it moved. Damien stood at the doorway with his hands securely gripped behind his back. And it looked like he understood what the nurse had said. He took a deep breath and smiled at Lena after looking at the flowers that were still in the nurse's hand for a long time.

"Why are you still standing there?" Lena said with a smile. "Come in."

Damien was the next person to stay with her. And she had been so thrilled about discussing arrangements with him for their shops' new business that she couldn't sleep. But Damien started to change his mind, which confused her. She saw that his hands were still behind him.

He responded quickly, "I'll be back in a minute," and his smile faded a little. "I just remembered that I have to call someone."

Lena scowled as he went away without turning his back to her. She thought he was hiding something in his hands behind him on purpose. Strange.

Lena turned to gaze at the nurse when she cleared her throat. She waved the bunch of flowers. Lena moaned since she didn't know what to do with them. Kellen may get the wrong idea if she kept them, and if she didn't, he would definitely be wounded. She realized she had to confront him and have that chat to put an end to the issue once and for all. But the truth was that she still wasn't ready. To face Kellen would mean addressing her marriage, her emotions, and everything else that was and wasn't in between.

Lena sighed and looked back up at the nurse, who had been waiting for her response patiently. "Please give them back to him," she pleaded. "And tell him not to bring me

anything else, especially not lilies.”

The nurse smiled and nodded to show she understood. “Should I throw them at his face to make it worse?”

Lena lifted an eyebrow. “No. Just giving them back would be fine. Thanks.”

Lena fell back into bed and closed her eyes as the nurse departed, and the door clicked shut behind her. She knew she would have to open her eyes soon, if not right away.

But Lena still wasn’t sure if she was ready a week later.

Kellen thankfully heard her plea and didn’t bring her any more flowers or anything. He would still sit outside her door, though. The nurse always kept her up to date on the situation and asked her if she wanted to call security and keep the man out of the hospital for good. Of course, Lena said no.

The trouble was, even though Kellen had wounded her a lot, she still couldn’t harm him back. Especially after hearing how much anguish and remorse he was in when he came into her room that day and she turned her face away from him. How could she damage someone who was already in so much pain? Also, her very devoted friends had already said and done a lot, and it was all rather over-the-top from what she had heard. Lena was afraid that if she added more to it, she would turn into the type of cruel person that she would eventually hate herself for becoming.

At first, Damien smiled, but then it turned into a big grin.

Lena could finally go home. It seemed like forever before Dr. Robert said it.

Ryan, who was next to Damien, hit him on the back too hard in happiness, and Lola, who was on the other side, screamed in his ear.

Lena seemed happy, and that made Damien smile even more. The poor woman had to eat the terrible hospital cuisine for a long time. Damien had made some chicken soup at home following his mother's recipe and tried to smuggle it in one day, but the security caught him red-handed, and it was a sad failure. Lola responded, "Pal, you should have told me. I'm the best at getting things past the toughest security. Mostly."

Damien had said with optimism, "Do you think you can get the broth inside?"

"Of course. Just pour the broth into two small soup containers, please. And please lend me your credit card so I can go to the nearest lingerie store quickly."

Damien's eyebrows came together in uncertainty, but then he realized what was going on and was horrified. He stared down at Lola's chest, and then he looked up again to see her nod with total sincerity. Damien, of course, said no.

But back to the happy present: now that Lena was heading home, he could finally utilize his mother's special recipes to make meals for Lena that would hopefully make her smile instead of gagging.

The following two hours were spent paying off debts and getting the discharge paperwork ready. Damien had a hard time since he had to witness Kellen's sad expression the whole time.

Kellen had written his name all over the documents while Lena was in the hospital. He had also signed the papers for the procedure. So he had to sign the discharge papers also so that Lena could go home.

Damien stopped Kellen from taking out his credit card. “You don’t need to spend any more money. Lena wouldn’t like it,” he said in a forceful voice so that Kellen realized how important this was to Lena and him. “She was actually talking about giving you back the money you’ve spent on her during her admission and surgery.”

He observed Kellen’s fingers go tighter around the credit card, and more lines form on his forehead. Damn, the guy looked like he had aged ten years in only a few weeks.

“She doesn’t have to give the money back.”

Damien nodded his head. “But she wants to. Don’t worry, she’s not broke. She’s been working and has her own savings. Dr. Robert also signed her up for a special program that helps middle-class cancer patients pay for their treatments, which are very expensive.”

Damien quickly paid the amount specified while Kellen’s credit card lingered over the billing counter. Damien gave the person at the other side of the counter Lena’s next month’s advance payment from the boutique, just like Lena had asked him to.

Damien kept telling Lena to pay the bills, but Lena was quite clear that she didn’t want to take money from anyone. At first, he was angry with her for being so stubborn, but he couldn’t help but appreciate how much she wanted to be free.

He didn’t understand why she looked at herself like she was ashamed of being the weakest person in the world when he saw her every day getting back up no matter how many times life knocked her down.

Lena would say that he took her up off the street and gave her a new life, but she didn’t understand how she had worked day and night to establish her own world and make his business a success.

“Give her some time to heal, Kellen,” he said firmly. Kellen stopped in his tracks and turned to Damien, who thought that Kellen was going to his guard post outside Lena’s door. “I know she needs to talk to you. No matter how much I or any of her friends don’t want her to, it’s going to happen. But now is not the right time. I guess you already know that, don’t you?”

He saw Kellen’s tense shoulders drop as if the guy was completely defeated.

Kellen said after a period of silence, with his back still to Damien, “I don’t want to hurt her more than I already have, but I can’t live without her either.”

Damien let out a sigh. “It’s more about what she wants.”

He wanted her to remain away from Kellen, though. He didn’t want her to go back to him. He hated Kellen just as much as Ryan and Lola did. But if Lena wanted things to be different, who was he or anyone else to get involved? He figured it out a few days earlier when he went into Lena’s room to give her a rose.

Lola told him how happy Lena was that he selected those pink flowers for the Dana baby, and he felt Lena would appreciate it if he got her one, too. But then he came in with the rose behind his back and heard the nurse say how lovely the lilies were as she held them up to Lena. Damien didn’t know why, but he felt uneasy when he saw Lena’s eyes widen as she gazed at the flowers. All of a sudden, one pink rose didn’t seem like enough. He did what he believed was best at the time. He smiled, made an excuse, and then walked out of the room.

What a great way to leave.

It was a routine procedure for a patient to be taken out of the hospital and put in a wheelchair. So, even though Lena could walk now, medical workers were wheeling her out.

Damien was already in his car in the driveway, resting against it and waiting for her to show up. He could tell that Kellen had taken his advice seriously and stayed the hell away from Lena. He relaxed a little because he knew there wouldn't be any drama for a while.

When he finally saw Lena come out the door, he jumped up and reached her with a big leap. At that moment, he felt like a joyful mountain goat and begged that Ryan and Lola, who were all over Lena... didn't think he was ridiculous. Lena leaned back and laughed as he placed his hand over her shoulders to lift her up and take her to the car.

"You know I can walk. Those strong drugs aren't in my system right now, so I can't spin out of control," she remarked with a laugh.

"I know," he said, but he still took her up in his arms. "Don't look so angry. This is just a normal part of the process."

Ryan and Lola followed Lena, who merely rolled her eyes. For some reason, they were once again in the middle of a furious quarrel. People who saw them would think they were meant to fight one another.

As Damien put on the seat belt, Lena, Ryan, and Lola said farewell. They all kissed Lena on the cheek, gave her advice that had previously been given many times, and made threats that showed how much they cared every time.

Ryan was going to head back to his hotel and get ready for his flight out of Velden. Back in South Hills, his house and company were waiting for him. “I know you’ve chosen to live in Velden, Lena, but I hope you’ll come to see me often. Will you?”

Lena’s face looked far away for a second before she blinked it away. “Someday I’ll.”

Ryan smiled for a moment since she didn’t dispute it.

“I’ll, too,” Lola said, glancing at her nails. “I’m really interested in seeing where Lena grew up and all that...”

Ryan puffed and looked blank. “Apparently, no one invited you, woman.”

Lola laughed. “Nobody owns South Hills. I can go to the city whenever I want. Now take me home. My place is at the intersection, just two blocks before your fancy, gold-plated hotel.”

Damien shook his head in fake anger, and Lena and he shared a funny glance. But it didn’t take long for them to start fighting with each other.

Lena answered firmly, “No, Dami, I’m not staying at your place.” “I can take care of myself just fine now. Dr. Robert wouldn’t have let me go home from the hospital otherwise.”

“With the warning that you’re going to take it easy for some days before they start with radiotherapy. The entire body of your tumor could not be removed in the surgery. Have you forgotten already?”

Lena huffed and poked the edge of the bandana that was tied around her head. “There’s only a little bit of the tumor left...”

“Which can be just as deadly as before if you give it time and keep being so damn stubborn!” Damien said angrily, but Lena turned away, and he pinched the tip of his nose as he saw her pout. “Okay,” he murmured after a time, getting back to his calm state. “I’ll take you to your apartment.”

He could tell that Lena was surprised that he was so easily swayed, but then she grinned at him because she knew she had won. If only she knew...

Lena’s eyebrows wrinkled in uncertainty. “Damien? Why are you back again?” she said, her voice trailing off as her eyes finally found the baggage he had brought with him.

Damien smiled and smirked as he moved by her and into the flat. “Since you wouldn’t stay at my place, I decided to stay at yours.”

Lena’s mouth dropped wide and stayed that way as she turned around to see Damien walking away from her house.

I can’t believe it!

Damien had just dropped her off and didn’t ask her to stay at his house again. He also carried her all the way up and didn’t let her go until she was comfortable sitting on the couch in her living room. Lena had to admit that it was strange that he departed without saying goodbye in the usual way when he would have informed her over and over how to take care of herself, about medicines, and how to phone him if anything went wrong. She should have understood that the man had a plan.

“Damien!” she yelled, not believing it. Her feet, which were tired, followed him. “I

told you I'd be fine on my own. I'll look out for myself."

Damien put his bag next to the couch and turned to gaze at her with anger. "I know, but I don't want to take a chance. The last time I left for a few days, you almost died in a hospital." He paused and took a long breath as if to shake off the awful memory, and then his face brightened up with the following words. "So I made the decision to take care of your health myself."

Lena said, "So you're saying you're my nurse now?" Damien's kind demeanor struck her heart, just like it usually did.

"That's right," he said with a grin. "Now, let's make you some chicken broth."

Kellen couldn't help but yell in anger, "What do you mean you sent the divorce papers to my lawyer? How could you do that without asking me?"

In front of him, his mother trembled with intense sobbing. But he was over it and knew how to keep his rage in check. He couldn't hang on because he was afraid he would lose his mind if he did. The earth beneath his feet was swiftly sliding away.

"Lena gave them to me at the engagement party before she left. I...", Celeste said, breathing through her mouth and felt very powerless. "I didn't know the truth yet, and neither did you. So I called your manager and had the papers sent right away."

"God damn it!" Kellen growled, cutting in. He didn't want to hear anymore, so he turned around and stormed out of the room.

This was awful. He was in hell, and it appeared like the devil was punishing him in the ways that he thought were best. He was stuck in a maze that he couldn't get out of, and every bad thing he had done in the past was coming back to hit him in the a*s.

He didn't stop until he was outside, beneath the broad sky. He fell down on a bench beside the sidewalk, his pulse racing as shackles tightened around it. He clenched his eyes tightly as he realized that there was only one path anymore, and that way could never be without Lena.

"Yes, that's why I left Velden," Damien responded, peeling carrots and chopping them into two-inch pieces. "And it worked. Red Cult has agreed to give us the fabrics, but we still need to make the final deal. I needed to talk to you about my plan first, and we need to hire people who know how to design and tailor clothes."

Lena grinned from the kitchen table as she watched him work like an expert at her kitchen counter. "You didn't have to wait. You could have finished everything right then and there."

He put a tiny whole chicken, chicken neck, carrots, stalk celery, onion, and parsley in a sauce pot. "I wanted to. You're my partner, Lena, and I value what you think about my choices."

Of course, he made her feel wanted again, just as he usually does... and from the first time, she opened her eyes and saw him.

"Where did you learn to cook like this?" After a long, comfortable pause, she said, pleased with how well he cooked as if he had created cooking himself.

"From my mother," he said, turning to offer her a sheepish look after adding enough water to cover the chicken and setting the pot on the heat. "She's a one-of-a-kind parent, I swear. When we were kids, she used to say, 'If women don't become like men and men don't like women, and both like each other, then the world can never be a happy and peaceful place.' She taught my older sister Karate so she wouldn't become a damsel, and she taught me how to cook so I could always take care of my better half." He scratched his head and smiled sheepishly.

Lena was amazed in the best way possible. She smiled widely, showing that she was impressed. “I swear I love your mother already, Damien, even though I haven’t met her yet.”

Damien smiled. “I’ll bet my last penny that she would love you too.”

He turned his attention to the soup, which was now boiling and started to skim the foam from the top. He also talked about the recipe and what he was doing to make the broth taste great. Lena paid close attention and decided right away that she would make the soup for all the sick and malnourished youngsters they had brought to Gwen’s when she got better.

She thought about Gwen’s and remembered that there was going to be a brunch there shortly. She had intended to bake pies for it and then help the sisters with other things, but now she felt it might be a bit hard to do all of that. Damien, who had taken it upon himself to be her nurse and cook, and the cleaning was going to be a big problem.

She was trying to figure out how to make the obstacle less hard without damaging it when her phone rang.

Damien remarked, “I bet it’s Lola,” looking over his shoulder. He laughed. “She might be calling to tell you that she killed Ryan with that stupid pocket knife she always has with her.”

Yes, that was a stretch. But Lena knew she wouldn’t be too astonished if it did happen.

But it turned out that the call came from a number she didn’t know. And when she picked it up, the other side was completely quiet.

“Hello?” she said again, but there was still no answer. “Who’s there?”

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No one talked, though. She heard someone sigh a second later. It was a long, deep inhale that meant something. She felt uneasy in the pit of her stomach.

She hung up right away with a grimace. She believed it was an incorrect number or a hoax call, but was it really?

“The news that this company is going under has spread like wildfire. We’re having trouble with the shareholders, our ratings have dropped, and employees are causing chaos. And you want an invitation to an orphanage’s brunch?”

Kellen said “yes” to his boss.

He was staring outside the glass barrier. The streets and buildings of Velden seemed like they were about to eat him alive. He heard his boss let out a dejected sigh and leave.

He put his fingertip on the vein that was pulsing under the skin of his temple. He knew he was standing on the brink, barely an inch away from losing everything, and that scared him even more.

He shut his eyes and saw Lena’s face. Smiling, gleaming, sobbing, and going away because they couldn’t stand to see him. His eyes hurt under the lids that were closing.

He was offered the choice of saving and keeping only one thing out of all the things he was about to lose. He would pick her without even thinking about it. He was doing precisely that right now, which is what he should have been doing from the start while he still had time.

“I can’t stand looking at your face anymore. You make me sick...”

Lena felt like she was crying nonstop and simply wanted to get away from the horrible feeling. But she couldn’t move since her feet were stuck to the earth due to their own weight.

And then, in the blink of an eye, just when she believed she would be locked in this horrible moment for the rest of her life, thin air pulled her out of it.

She was sprinting along a desolate road, and the blackness around her was deeper than any night could provide. At that point, she didn’t know anything except that she was scared something incredibly horrible was about to happen and that the only way to get away from it was to keep running. But suddenly, out of nowhere, a car hit her with its hood with a lot of power. She could feel her bones shattering, her head shaking, and all of her organs moving about inside her. The ache that hit her suddenly was too much to handle.

She was lying on the ground and couldn’t move any of her limbs. She could feel her eyes starting to shut, which she knew was a sign of something far worse.

She had to keep her eyes open.

She had to keep her eyes open no matter what.

But her eyelids felt like they were made of lead. And her baby was sobbing close by.

She had to save the baby. But she couldn’t move or keep her eyes open anymore.

A soft voice broke through her suffering and said, “Lena. Lena! Sweetie, wake up.”
“Sweetheart, it’s just a dream. Open your eyes. Shh...”

As she gently woke up from the harsh nightmare and the prison of sleep, she realized she was still crying because she felt so sad and weak. When she opened her eyes, she could only see Damien's face in a fuzzy way.

"That's it," he murmured, letting out a breath of relief. "It's okay."

She was out of breath and lifted a shaking hand to wipe away as many tears as she could. Her cries turned into hiccups.

"Do you still have those nightmares?" Damien inquired, taking his hands off her shoulders now that she was awake and calm.

Damien was the only one who knew about her dreams that happened again and over again. After all, she had been living with him for months after he picked her up wounded and hurt off the street.

"Often," she said, her voice husky.

They wouldn't attack her every night anymore, but they would regularly do it after becoming weary of hiding behind the corner.

"But they still do, don't they? A lot of the time."

"I've accepted long ago that they've become a part of my life," she remarked, her voice thick with emotion.

He was seated on the side of the bed, hovering over her as she lay there.

The lamp post outside the window gave her bedroom a dull light. It cast shadows on his face, making the wrinkles of worry on his forehead and around his brown eyes look even worse.

His eyes were quite interesting. In the daytime, they appeared black, but she had noticed that if he was weary or drowsy... They would change color to a lighter shade of brown that was hard to see.

“I hope the counselor Doctor Robert has chosen for you will help,” he said.

“We’ll find out tomorrow,” she said, blinking her eyelids, which were heavy with sleep.

She had two appointments at the hospital tomorrow, one after the other. First, she saw Doctor Robert, who would check on how she was healing. Then, she saw a psychiatrist whose name she couldn’t recall just now. It didn’t matter; she was confident Damien would remember. He was keeping track of everything for her these days, like when she needed to take her medicine, what foods she could eat, where she had placed her bandana, her doctor’s appointments, and the fact that she shouldn’t take too long baths in case she became sick. He took his job as her nurse very seriously.

His soft voice murmured into the stillness of the room, “Everything will be fine, Lena. You’ll see.”

She grinned. And that smile quickly faded into a look of hope on her face.

But was there really a solution to get rid of these bad dreams? Or the memories? And the most crucial question was whether or not she even wanted to at this time.

There is something bad about melancholy. At first, it seems awful, but after a while, night after night, and then for months and years, people start to like it in a very strange, sick manner. It means more than any enjoyment, and with time, it becomes something to treasure and dream about.

“I only remember that one night with my baby, Damien,” she said, her tongue thick with sleep, yet it was more soothing to talk to him right now. “I don’t have anymore.”

It wasn’t about what he thought of her ailing state or what he said about the constant mention of her night of sorrow and loss. It was more about her letting everything out to someone she knew would never condemn her.

Was she selfish? Yes, maybe she truly was.

“And you’re stuck between wanting to forget and cherish it,” he expressed what no one else had uttered.

She only sent out a quiet breath as an answer.

“It’s going to be okay, Lena,” he stated, this time with more force. “You’ll see.”

She opened her eyes just a little bit. She wanted to know, “How can you be so sure?” She needed to hear it again so she could believe it. She knew what he would say since he had said it many times before.

“I believe in fate, and I believe in you,” he said, and he looked as serious as he spoke. “You’ll be okay.”

She shut her eyes, and this time, the grin on her lips lasted.

Why couldn’t Kellen ever say this to her? What made it such that they were condemned to die this way?

She heard shuffling sounds and knew that Damien was getting up and getting ready to go for his own bed, which was the living room’s improvised couch bed.

“Damien,” she yelled.

“Well...”

“Stay?”

He BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR She could only feel him slip into the bed with her eyes closed. For modesty’s sake, he laid on top of the cover. “Damien, you’ll freeze. You can get into the comforter. I know you wouldn’t take advantage of me.”

“But what if you take advantage of me instead?” She smiled at the sound of his mischievous voice.

“I’m too hot, Lena bird, go to sleep,” he said with a hoarse laugh.

She did, though. And the remainder of the night was free of nightmares.

The sensation of safety may bring about amazing things.

Lena woke up in the morning and saw that the space next to her was empty. His quiet voice emanating from the living room told me he was on the phone. She made the decision that she needed to send him to work today. He had been her shadow in the flat for two days. It was evident that it couldn’t go on forever; he needed to focus on his new business since the shops needed him severely. Lola couldn’t handle everything by herself, though. Lena was afraid that, at some time, she might stab someone in the eye with her pocket knife.

When Lena or Damien were there, Lola’s wrath or annoyance was one thing, but when they weren’t, it was a whole other thing.

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Lena stood up in bed, pushing the covers away. She gasped when her back broke, and her vision started to swirl out of control. She promptly closed her eyes and waited for the dizziness to go away, which had been a normal thing for her since the operation. Any quick movement was too much for her brain, and she had to physically hold her breath to keep from falling face-first to the floor.

Slowly, she walked to the bathroom and locked the door. Then she turned to gaze in the mirror. And she looked... at the person she had turned into.

There was a woman in front of her who had no hair on her head. Her cheeks were sunken, her jaw stuck out sharply, and her eyes looked horrible because they were so deep in their sockets. She looked like a bald joke that didn't make sense.

She shuddered and thought about how Damien could even look at her without laughing.

The loud sound of a fist hitting the bathroom door woke her up from her bad thoughts. As she sprang, the toothbrush in her still hand dropped to the tiled floor.

“Stop staring at the mirror, Lena. Breakfast is waiting for you at the table.”

Her eyes became bigger. How did he find out? How did he always know? She was positive that there was no hole in the door and that there were no cameras or anything like that in her bathroom. Also, Damien wasn't the kind to be a peeping Tom. So how could he have known that for the last two mornings, she had secretly stared at herself in the bathroom mirror and hated what she saw?

Damien was already at the tiny kitchen table when she stepped out of the bathroom after completing her morning routine. There was already a chair moved back in front of him. She walked and sat down on it, happy to see food. Tea, oats, and toast. As she got stronger every day, owing to Damien's never-ending patience and drive, she also started to taste things again. She could eat more now without him having to push her.

"You don't have to wear that bandana when you're home, Lena. Let your skin breathe a little. It's not even that cold today," he said, looking up at her head while he stuffed his lips with bread.

Lena's hand went up to touch the bandana without her meaning to. She did her best to disguise how uncomfortable she was. But of course, Damien was a mind reader these days, so he saw it and sighed, then dropped the half-eaten bread on his plate.

He added angrily, "If you're worried about what I would think if I saw you bald, you should know that it doesn't matter to me." "You still look as beautiful as you did before."

Lena sat up straight in her chair and shook her head. "You call this...," she said, pointing to her body. "Beautiful? Right now, I'm a hairless skeleton, Damien."

"Remember," he added, leaning in. "I've seen you at your worst, and I've memorized your beauty through every scar. A bald head or less flesh on your body won't make me forget it."

She had a lot of scars in her heart, and he knew about all of them. As she learned more and more, she could clearly remember how he had been the buddy who had saved her life over and over again in more ways than she could count.

Before she could even think about what he said, he leaned forward and untied the knot on her bandana with his long, skinny arms. When he pulled, the bandana slid

off, and she couldn't breathe.

She watched his black eyes go a little brighter as she glanced up at him. It was brown now, and her reflection shone in the strong beams of sun coming in through the kitchen window.

She had a fresh thought. It might be that the change in the hue of his eyes had nothing to do with being tired or drowsy. Instead, it could have been the feelings he was having. Strong feelings that made his eyes light up while he worked to make her life better all the time.

Both of them jumped a little when her phone rang.

Damien cleared his throat, rose up, and started to pick up the cups and plates from the table. She snatched up the phone with one hand and grasped his wrist with the other. The number was not known.

"Let me wash," she said with her mouth. In response, he looked at her in disbelief. She softly huffed as he carried the dishes to the sink.

She grimaced when she didn't hear anything on the other end of the phone.

She had been getting calls like this for two days, and she was starting to feel uncomfortable. At this point, call blocking wouldn't work because the numbers would change every time.

She didn't bother to say hello since she knew what was about to happen. And, as predicted, a sigh came. It was loud enough for her to know it was genuine, yet quiet enough that she couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman.

She hung up the phone with a grimace still on her face.

Damien was humming a melody that caught her interest. She gazed at the back of his head. Part of her wanted to tell him about the phone calls, but the other part didn't. Because she knew he would just grow more upset. The guy was already worried about her health.

It's not a big deal. She murmured while taking big breaths. Just a foolish person making scary hoax calls. That's all.

The next day, she decided she was done with doing nothing but eating and sleeping all day. That, too, while Damien performed all the housework for her.

She was strong enough to act like a normal person and do some job now.

She got down at her workstation with papers and sketch pencils and started coming up with clothing designs and ideas that she thought would work well for their new business. It was hard to convince Damien that she was really okay, though. In the end, he persisted in hanging over her with determination. She knew that he was checking to see if she was throwing up blood and fainting on the papers, no matter how much he appeared to be just staring at her drawing patterns.

Yes, it was frustrating that he was making such a big deal out of it. But she was also thankful for it since she loved that someone cared about her so much.

"I'm really okay, Damien, really," she responded. "It's therapeutic to draw new designs." "It feels good to finally use my fashion design degree in a useful way."

"But you will stop when you're tired, okay?"

"Uh-huh," she said, agreeing. After that, she moved away from her desk and looked

at him with a serious face. “Damien, you need to start going to the boutiques. If you keep avoiding it for too long, our new business will not go well. The video calls and emails are just not enough; you need to be there in person to make sure everything goes well. And don’t try to deny it,” she scolded when he tried to deny it. “I don’t need someone to watch me all the time; I’m fine.”

“Okay,” he said with a sigh of defeat. “I’ll start going to work, but not until tomorrow. We still have to see your doctors today.”

She grinned because she had won.

Kellen was well hidden behind the huge pile of flowers in the florist store.

In front of his face, there was a space between two big Dahlias that gave him a good view of the hospital across the street.

There was a bee buzzing about him. He smacked the object away when it got too near, but he was too scared to look anywhere else.

There, with Damien’s aid, Lena got out of the automobile.

Kellen’s hands turned into tight fists next to him. She smiled at Damien and appeared joyful, even though she still looked weak. Damien moved in to adjust the bandana that had slipped down to her eyebrows before they could go. They said no to the wheelchair that the staff provided, and then they went away. Damien had his arm protectively over her shoulder, and she leaned into him, appearing as comfortable as she could.

He let all the bad sentiments out of his chest with a deep sigh that rocked the dahlias in front of him.

Was he going to lose Lena? Not that he had her anymore.

And could he blame her? No. He had already done enough of it.

He had driven her toward it, no matter where she was now. The outside world could have worked together to make it happen, but he was too humiliated to say that he had taken the chance with both hands and so eagerly.

It is the worst thing that can happen to possessive individuals. In their haze of claiming their domain, they frequently smother and destroy the most priceless object they had always wanted to guard.

When Lena was totally out of sight, and his heart stopped racing, the ringing in his pocket started again. He left the flower store without paying attention to the florist, who was giving him a dirty look. The florist was sure to get angry after the man stood in that small space for hours, asking random questions about flowers, getting in the way of other customers as they picked flowers, and then leaving without buying a single petal.

He walked to his car, which was parked on the curb. He picked up the phone with one hand while putting the other in his pocket. “Got an invite to Gwen’s Home brunch, but I had to promise to give something in return,” his boss said from the other side.

He murmured, “That’s good,” and his lips twitched into a smile.

“How can it be good, sir?” The manager’s voice was full of fear. “Some of the investors want their money back, and most of our worried employees are quitting. At this point, charity sounds like a saw-blade that will kill you...”

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Kellen interrupted and said, “How many sports cars do I have in Brooklyn?”

“Sir?”

“Make plans so that I can sell them all.” Nothing else mattered. His money, his business, his stupid cars and watches, and his mansion... Nothing, and I mean nothing, could bring back what he had lost in his craziness.

He looked at the floral store one final time before getting into the automobile. He saw brilliant, fresh lilies. He turned away, his eyes stinging with tears as he remembered the last time he was turned down and was ready for more pain.

“Yo, Lena, look at my masterpiece,” Lola remarked, brimming with enthusiasm and pride as she held out the toy she had crafted.

“It’s an owl,” Lena said, looking at the toy blankly.

“Good job figuring it out.”

“And it has a p***s.”

Selene’s shoulders drooped. “You told me to make them look real!”

Lena groaned deeply and rubbed her forehead. Her bandana slipped a little from where it was supposed to be, but she had more important things to worry about, like making sure that the toys they were stitching together to sell as fundraisers and other homemade items didn’t have body parts that were controversial.

“Yes,” Lena said, throwing her hands up. “Realistic, like... not putting a third or fourth eye on a stick figure’s forehead. You scared little Nancy, the poor girl.”

“Have you ever not seen Collin Harper, Lena? You know, his half-brother?” Lola was becoming angry now as she cut a piece of material into a spherical shape. Lena hoped they weren’t breasts or anything like that.

Lena said, “That’s it, Lola. You won’t make s****l organs.”

“Don’t be silly, Lena. I’m also making them pants and camis!”

“No,” she said in a hard voice, with her eyes set.

“Fine, you win. I lose!”

Lena was happy, so she turned back to put the threaded needle into her own toy, which was a really lovely giraffe.

They were in Gwen’s house, sitting on a mat on the floor. Getting ready for the brunch celebration on Monday was in full swing. Lola and Lena worked hard on the things they were greatest at here, such as making toys and table mats for the home. Some of the sisters were preparing crafts, while others were in the kitchen baking cupcakes. There were also a lot of volunteers, like Lola and Lena, who came out of love for the kids.

Damien had dropped them off in the morning and then gone to work, leaving Lola in charge of Lena.

Damien had eased down a little about his nurse duties after his previous appointment with Dr. Robert when he was told that she was doing better. Lena was thankful. The guy had been spending practically all of his days following her, ignoring his business

and his own life.

She would have to go through a week of radiation to get rid of the rest of the tumor tissues in her brain that were still there after the operation. Doctor Robert had said that he thought that would be the end of her illness, at least until it came back, which they were assured was not unusual.

Lena was happy for now that she would be getting rid of the tumor very soon.

Even her visit with the psychiatrist, Dr. Bistro, was unexpectedly helpful. Lena found it quite simple to talk about her nightmares and the sadness that had previously made her want to die more than anything else. The man was ancient and had a twinkle of peace and friendliness in his eyes that were getting smaller and smaller. When she stepped out of his cabin, she was attracted by the sense of a wonderful kind of emptiness within.

Lola remarked, “Are you going to faint?” as Lena bid farewell to Dave and the other youngsters in the hall. The sisters were putting away the handcrafted goods in boxes.

Lena turned and frowned at Lola. “Why should I?”

Lola shrugged, lifted her arms, and rolled her wrists. Her face crunched as she heard a few little cracks. “You look... like you’re really tired.”

Lena hit Lola’s arm and said in a sing-song voice, “Same to you.”

They strolled across the big, grassy front yard of the orphanage where the brunch would be hosted. There was only one day left till the big event. Teenagers from nearby schools and some guys from the area were busy building up a stage on one side of the grass near the ancient oak trees. Seeing all these individuals of all ages and social classes come together for the same reason—to support these kids—really broke

my heart.

Lola was standing on the curb and mumbling to herself in irritation.

They had asked for a cab around half an hour ago, but it still hadn't arrived. But it wasn't odd for a cab to show up this late in the city; some drivers liked to show up late to seem cool. No one has yet figured out why this person was acting this way.

Lola said, "We should have said yes when Damien offered to send his office car for the day, like always. But no, you had to point out that we weren't doing office work and blah blah blah." "There's just too many mosquitoes here, and I'm wearing a f*****g maxi dress. Those nasty blood suckers are all partying inside!"

Lena could really see Lola moving about like a crazy person. Lena thanked the heavens that she was wearing trousers.

"Why don't you take a walk?" she advised.

Lola lifted the dress to her knees and stomped away angrily, screaming, "I was thinking just that."

Lena groaned and waited patiently at the curb. She could have walked home, which wasn't too far, but she still hadn't gotten back to full strength. It would be really unjust to physically fall to her knees on the way home and make her pals even more worried. They had already done a lot for her.

The sky was gloomy at the time, and the wind was blowing in a strange way on a hot day, which was nice. The cricket bugs on the shrubs and trees behind her kept squeaking in time. If you listen closely, the insect song might make you feel dizzy.

She was tapping her foot on the ground and looking at Lola, who was still stomping

and pulling her dress away, about fifteen feet away. When she heard a vehicle squeal, she turned her gaze to the road.

There was their cab.

It was moving slowly toward the side of the road to pull over. She took a step forward, smiled, and yelled for Lola at the same time.

There were also screeching sounds coming from the other side of the street. The difference was that it was ten times louder and sounded really scary as it quickly drifted closer. Instinctively, she jerked her head towards the sounds. She was scared and shocked when she saw a truck coming straight toward her at a crazy, diabolical speed. People were screaming all around her, but her gaze was glued to the metal monster. She remembered a time when a car almost hit her in the same way, and it was the most terrifying thing that had ever happened to her.

The taxi driver's angry obscenities and Lola's ear-piercing cries faded into the background.

But suddenly, someone yelled "Lena!" practically in her ear and grabbed her arm, pulling her out of the way of the truck in a way that wasn't very kind.

She gasped as she saw the quick movement, and the next thing she knew, she was slamming into a body that struck the ground with a scream of its own, bringing her down with it. She was out of breath, and so was the person who had pulled her out of the way of death. She understood that he had intentionally softened her fall with his own body, which was now resting beneath her.

She blinked a few times to clear the dots in front of her eyes as she raised her head. As she focused her eyes, she saw that the face looking back at her was not one she had seen before.

Kellen was it.

And much like hers, his heart was pounding in his chest. His face was as white with fear as hers was. He moved them both about to straighten them up, and she sat up, feeling like her world was a little off balance.

The vehicle screeched angrily and turned toward the road, then sped away.

“Damn it, the bastard ran away!” Kellen swore, shivering. She couldn’t tell if it was from anger or terror.

Lena was still a little dizzy as she watched the gently settling cloud of dust that the truck had left behind. Kellen looked at her with worried eyes.

He questioned, “Are you okay?” while breathing heavily and wrapping one of his arms around her shoulder to keep her at his side.

Lena murmured, “Yes,” as she came out of her daze. At that moment, her body became aware of how close they were to each other. She could feel his muscles pressing against her and his strong grip around her shoulders, holding her stable while her knees shook at the stench of death that was so close again.

She was starting to wriggle out of his arms, but he didn’t seem to notice or want to let her go. Lola was strong enough to pull her away from Kellen, which was a good thing.

“Oh my God! Lena!” Lola yelled, making Lena jump. She hugged Lena so tightly that it hurt her bones, then let her go just as soon, keeping her at arm’s length. “Let me see how many bones have broken,” Lola murmured, looking down at her body. “At this rate, you’re going to be the most broken person in the whole world!”

Yes.

She assured Lola that she hadn't broken any bones and hadn't lost any blood; after all, someone had taken the impact of her fall. She turned around to see Kellen on the phone, talking quickly with his eyes furrowed and one hand in his hair.

He hung up and put his hand over his eyes. She walked up to him carefully.

He didn't open his eyes, but he knew she was close by and murmured, "The police will be here any minute."

"Thanks," she said. There was a lot they needed to talk about, but this was all she could say for now. "Are you okay?" she inquired, worrying about how he looked.

He didn't answer. He let out a trembling sigh as he ran a hand down his face. "It was on purpose," he muttered, saying what she had already thought.

Kellen slammed past the butler who had let him into Isaac Arthur's fancy duplex residence. Kellen walked down the short hallway and into the sitting area, with the butler following him like a persistent, buzzing bee.

Isaac Arthur was in the middle of drinking tea, and he was sitting up straight and looking quite calm and cool.

Kellen said, "I know it's you," and pointed at the man, who only grinned at the accusation.

Isaac answered, “Well, nice to meet you too, Kellen,” and put the teacup down. He told the butler who had been standing at the entrance to go away.

“Stop it, Arthur,” Kellen shouted between clenched teeth. He was coming close to wanting to beat the man to death. “You’ve already ruined me; my business is falling apart faster than a comet. You got your revenge, so why are you after Lena?”

Isaac lifted an eyebrow and smiled playfully. The bags under his eyes, the evident weight loss, and the fact that his hair was getting grayer were all physical symptoms that were very different from how calm he seemed. The man was stressed out and maybe perhaps not getting enough sleep.

When people are in pain, the good and the bad react in different ways.

Isaac tilted his head back so that the back of his head rested on the backrest of the luxurious sofa and said, “You think I’m trying to hurt your ex-wife?”

Kellen squinted and said, “Oh, I’m sure of it.” “You and your father own the right to have people run over by a car.”

Isaac shook with a deep laugh. “Well, let’s try something different now. Anyway, you’re here to say?”

“Stop,” Kellen ordered sternly. “Stop whatever you’re doing right now. Otherwise, you’ll be locked up in a cell next to your horrible daughter. The police have your name on their list of suspects, Arthur.”

“And yet you’re afraid of me,” Isaac said slowly.

Kellen’s blood heated because Isaac was correct.

He was afraid. Afraid of what he would do next, afraid that Lena would get harmed again or worse.

When he was one of the richest people in the country, that was one thing. But now that his firm had failed and his money was running out, it was like quicksand was sucking it all up, and he felt virtually powerless. It used to be easy for him to protect his loved ones and get rid of certain bad things.

Kellen ran out of Isaac's flat, but not before hitting the old criminal in the jaw with a punch that broke bones.

The police had talked to them, and practically every witness indicated that the terrible event appeared planned. But every one of those claims has the word "probably" following it. The officers also talked about the notion that the motorist was either inebriated or asleep.

Kellen told them to offer Lena security, but the fuckers thought it was too much at the time and said they would rather wait for more information. He was too upset to handle it.

He really wanted to hire bodyguards for her, but he didn't have any money. But thank goodness he still had thoughts.

And that's when the stalking started like he wasn't already doing it.

He thought that if he couldn't afford her bodyguards, he could at least become one himself. He was not going to see any more blood on Lena, no matter what.

Lena remained calm, but Damien and Lola were condemning the whole family of the mysterious truck driver. Their vocabulary is vibrant, their tone is crazy, and their eyes are searing. It had been like this since Damien got there and got a call from her. The

police car sped away with an ambulance in tow shortly after the policemen took their statements.

It was strange to watch Damien thank Kellen for nodding. It was awkward for everyone to stand there and not attempt to pull Kellen's head off.

Damien had said, "What were you doing here, by the way?" as he put Lola and her in his car.

"Passing by," Kellen had said quickly, his gaze blankly fixed on her face.

Lena wanted to think it was true.

Kellen remained beside the road like a confused man as the car drove away. Lena couldn't take her eyes off of him until he was totally out of sight, too far behind.

She moaned gently and closed her eyes, which made her head hit the back of the bench.

That night, as she leaned against the window frame in her pajamas and looked out at the darkness, she saw Kellen, who she knew well, walking down the sidewalk in a hoody. She knew she wasn't wrong; she could never be wrong about who he was, even if everyone else was. She furrowed her brows and stepped back into the gloomy room's shadows.

And as Damien climbed into her bed, over a pillow that separated them, just like he had the night her nightmare had come back, she closed her eyes and knew he was still out there. And she wasn't sure how to feel about it.

"Night, Lena," he said, moving his hand across the distance between them and over the edge of the cushion until it found hers.

She liked how warm his hand was. “Night, Dami.”

At that moment, she couldn’t help but feel secure and warm but also lost, confused, and in danger. There was just too much of everything, both good and awful. It was almost hard for her to understand everything because of how she was feeling.

She understood what was true in the past, but what was this here and now?

Whatever worry Lena had been feeling after almost getting hit by a truck, it all went away as soon as she stepped inside the orphanage grounds.

It was a lovely day, and the grass in front of Gwen’s Home was even sunnier because of the sisters and volunteers who were getting everything ready at the last minute. Some of the older kids from the home were helping them in any way they could. Chairs were set up in the shadows of four huge oak trees across the grass, one of which was the oldest oak tree in the whole city of Velden.

Lena walked with Damien and Lola, and for the first time, she noticed the Ashley-style orphanage building. It was old and worn out in some parts, yet it never appeared spooky. With so many innocent people and their altruistic saviors in the building, it felt more like a paradise than anything else.

As they came through the main doors and into the hall, a group of kids in their best clothing ran toward them.

Lola smiled and held up her camera. “Aren’t you all looking beautiful?” “Now smile big and say Cake!”

The kids all stood in line and yelled, “Cake.”

Nancy, a four-year-old girl, walked up to Lena as she was laughing and stole shy

looks at Damien. Nancy had put on her favorite Elsa dress, but Lena saw that a few buttons on the back of it were open. Damien beat her to it before she could kneel down and button up her dress.

“Hi there,” he said slowly as he turned Nancy around so her back was to him. He buttoned up her dress and added, “You look so pretty today.”

Nancy turned around, and Lena gasped as she saw the girl’s face flush crimson. “Thank you. You’ve cleaned up nicely, too,” she said in her usual bashful voice to Damien.

Then Lola ran over to Nancy and pulled the small child away, claiming she needed a braid like Elsa’s, too. Lena and Damien observed as Lola sat on a stool with a basket of various combs. Little girls lined up in front of her to get their hair done.

“Nancy’s got a crush on you,” Lena said as she playfully jabbed him in the side with her elbow.

Damien smirked like a wicked boy. His nose had little dents from wearing reading glasses a lot. “At least now I can say that someone is noticing my charms,” he said, leaning in a little. She noticed the strange shade of brown that was taking over the normal hue of his eyes. She drew a quick breath because seeing into his eyes was so lovely.

The way Damien’s eyes seemed foggy had held her transfixed, but it also shook her. He broke eye contact with them and looked down at his side with a grimace. Then, a sweet grin came across his lips. Lena saw a bunch of lads nearby who were waiting for something. One of them, with a beautiful dark complexion and a head full of black hair, was pulling on Damien’s pants.

The lads moved a bit closer when they saw that Damien was looking at them. A cute

blonde boy handed up a container of hair gel. “Miss Lola told you to make us look good.”

He laughed and said, “Ah ha.” Lola smirked from the seat, and Damien looked up at her for a second. She had a three-year-old girl with a pouty face sitting on her lap, waiting with a serious look on her face as Lola twisted her hair into a bun. The small girl seemed to think that if she uttered even one word, her hair would not be able to be knotted properly.

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Damien worked hard to make the boys appear good, and while he was doing so, Lena moved deeper into the building to find her favorite youngster and mother, Gwen. She saw many of the sisters in one of the nurseries for the younger kids after going down one of the hallways and stopping to say hello.

She had on a modest white cotton dress with half sleeves that came down to her knees. It fluttered about her as she practically ran into the room.

“Ah, there you guys are,” Lena said with a smile as she walked up to the crib. “Are you going to change his diaper today?”

Gwen smiled back at Lena with love. “All the sisters are busy right now. How are you doing, dear?”

Lena helped Gwen put a new diaper on Dave, who was gurgling and screaming when he saw her. “Very good. The doctor said I’m no longer in danger of dying, but I will need to have a session of radiotherapy after a while.”

“And then you’ll be completely better?”

“He said so,” Lena remarked with a smile, feeling better immediately at the notion of getting rid of her disease completely.

“Mother Gwen?...” Lena stopped talking. She took a deep breath and allowed the question to come out of her mouth. “When I get rid of the tumor completely, will I be able to start the process of adopting Dave again?”

“Of course you can,” Gwen said, and Lena let out a breath of relief. “I was going to talk to you about it after the party, in fact.”

Lena let the hope in her heart spread all over her and never stop. Her eyes shone with happiness at the thought of a dream that suddenly felt so real. It seemed like fate had gotten weary of clashing with her all the time. Things were going so well for her that she dared to hope for the best.

They sat in the front row of chairs that had been set out for them under the oak trees. Damien sat next to her, and then Lola sat next to him. Everyone watched, clapped, and cheered on the kids who had gathered on the makeshift stage to play. After Gwen spoke, she thanked the visitors for attending and asked them for whatever support they could give that would make the kids’ lives better and fill their days with pleasure.

It was hilarious to witness a volunteer Spider-Man jump around while the cool dudes performed the famous Spider-Man song. After that, a female sang “Let It Go,” much like Elsa did, with all the angst. One of the audience members got smacked in the face by the gloves she flung away. Lena knew him as the head of a well-known construction firm. The middle-aged guy, who was usually quite cranky, smiled for the first time in a long time. People nearby started laughing. Lena and Damien cheered loudly while Lola whistled like a crazy person. Dave pumped his small fists in the air and laughed like everyone else when Lena held him. Nancy, the four-year-old bundle of sweetness, and her group sang “Old MacDonald Had a Farm.” Even though they forgot their lines halfway through and made things up as they went along, it was a tremendous hit.

After the kids’ performances, which made each child a bit timid but proud and happy, all the visitors proceeded toward the long tables that were set up. There were a lot of different sorts of refreshments available in a buffet format, and everyone stood in line with plates to fill their hungry bellies.

Damien said, “Why don’t you get a second plate?” as he stood behind Lola and watched her load her dish to the top.

Lena put her lips together to keep from laughing. She was caressing Dave’s back, and the youngster was quite focused on attempting to grab her bandana. Maybe she was wondering why it was in her hair.

Selene turned her head to stare at Damien before moving away and mumbling.

Lena hit him on the shoulder and said, “She just likes to eat! What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing,” Damien said with a grimace. “It’s not fair that she doesn’t gain weight even though she eats a lot. Not everyone is that lucky.”

“Oh boy. Are you envious?”

“It’s a real fact!”

Lena smiled as she saw him frown and said, “Ah, you’re jealous.”

Damien handled both of their plates because she was already busy with Dave. They were going toward the checkered picnic mats that were put out on groomed grass next to the vegetable garden on the left side of the Oak trees. Lola was already sitting on one of the mats with her legs extended out in front of her and her mouth full of chocolate cupcakes.

She put Dave down in the middle of the mat. She sat down in front of him and cooed back to his babbling.

The sound of a guitar playing in the microphone came out of nowhere and filled the

air around her.

Lena stopped right away, not because of how well the guitar player played or for any other reason. She simply knew who could play the guitar like that. It was more of a gut feeling than a scientific reality.

When her face swung to the side, and she saw Kellen from the side, her gut told her she was right.

What was he doing here? She was shocked and wondering.

He was on stage, sitting on a high stool and playing the song “Tale as Old as Time.”

“The holy beast has graced us with his missing presence. Wonderful!” Lola said, not impressed, as she chewed on a piece of cake.

Damien merely growled softly. Since he knew he had stopped Kellen from being hit by that huge vehicle, he had been very passive about her since yesterday.

Little Belle whirled around with Spider-Man in front of the stage. The incident was funny, but Lena couldn’t take her eyes off Kellen as he deftly moved his fingers across the strings. She still remembers all the nights they spent together while they were dating. She would sit on the balcony of his apartment and be entranced by his guitar playing. She had always felt that he would have been a great singer if he didn’t have to run his father’s business.

Kellen abruptly changed the direction of the song and spun it into a new one as it got closer to the conclusion. And as he looked up at her, she almost gasped because she knew which song it was.

You’re the light and the dark.

You are the hue of my blood.

You're the medicine, and you're the agony.

You are the only thing I want to touch.

I never realized it could mean so much, so much.

Lena quickly glanced aside, but it was too late; her thoughts had already gone back to the first time they had s*x. He sat on the ledge with a guitar and played the song while singing it softly in her ear.

Everything was just right. They were so perfect that they never had to take a test to discover if their love could survive the hardest things in life, like the licks of fire and the depths of the great ocean. And when the moment eventually arrived, and they had to face the ultimate test, it was over quickly; they had broken up.

What good would it do if he brought up the music and their days and nights together?

What good could it possibly do if he stared at her with such passion that she always melted into him?

Lena let out the heavy air that had been locked in her chest as the song came to an end, halfway through and like a foggy memory of a rainbow.

It hurt. It simply hurt.

She had been eating like a robot the whole time and just now noticed that her plate was empty. She could see Kellen talking to some folks from the side.

Damien discreetly pulled her plate away, and she could see he wasn't staring at her

on purpose. But his face was normal, somewhere between happy and welcoming to people who wanted to be with him. Lena, on the other hand, understood better; she could see the shadows. He had learned to read her, and she had learned to read him as well. Their friendship had grown stronger while they were both at their lowest points: she was sad, and he was under a lot of stress from establishing his business. They had learned to stand up for one another and had battled together. They were still battling.

Dave was whining like a baby, and Damien had put him on his lap and bounced him gently to quiet him down.

Lena's lips turned up in a smile as she saw it. She could picture it so clearly: Damien in a rocking rocker with a child—maybe his child—his spectacles drooping low on his nose as he sang a lullaby.

She blinked and shook her head, then she rose up and brushed her clothing down.

“He needs to sleep,” she whispered quietly as she leaned down and opened her arms for Dave. Damien finally looked up at her and smiled softly. He gave her the baby.

She said, “I’m going to put him in his crib.”

He nodded without saying anything.

All of a sudden, it seemed weird. Damien looked at her for longer than he needed to, and she fidgeted, not knowing if she should say something or just turn around and leave. After a few more seconds, he eventually looked away and lowered his head to look at his open hands.

Lola was glancing back and forth. “Do you want my knife or what? To break the silence?” she eventually spoke, her expression emotionless. “It’s like, guys, this is boring. The universe needs some action.”

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When Lena stepped into the orphanage building, Dave had already drooled and was resting his head on her shoulder. His eyes were half closed.

She was halfway down the empty hallway and close to the nursery doors when she heard footsteps behind her.

“Lena...” Kellen said.

She stopped in front of the nursery door and turned around to see Kellen standing just behind her. When he saw her holding Dave in her arms, his face changed into an unfathomable look.

She saw that he had dropped weight by looking at his whole body. His shirt was a touch big, and his muscles weren't as big as they used to be.

She turned away again without saying a word and went inside the nursery. As she put Dave, who was already asleep, into the crib, she could sense eyes on her. Kellen was resting against the door frame with his arms folded across his chest as she straightened up. His eyebrows were wrinkled, and his gaze showed an amazing emptiness and then a need.

She could feel tears welling up in her eyes, but she forced them back down hard.

It wasn't hard to figure out what was going on in his head. It was a shattered dream, a wish that was never intended to come true.

She walked out past him and into the hallway. Everyone was outside at the gathering,

having fun in the sun. She stood still within, with one high window letting in light. She pushed the curtains wider apart, letting in more light. She thought it could help ease the tension between them, but it was only wishful thinking.

While she was peering out the window, she heard someone moving behind her. She thought he would speak first, but when he didn't, and she felt like he was holding his breath tensely, she spoke out instead. "You need to stop following me."

She was talking about more than just today. She had seen him on the sidewalk in front of her apartment last night through the window. And she could tell he knew it, too, by the deep breath he let out. She knew.

He said, "Lena, your life is in danger." "Isaac, he—"

So, this time, it was Isaac who made sure she died. Not surprising.

"Then you should have just told the police and let it go," she said.

"I did," he responded quickly. "But Isaac is dangerous, and you don't know him. What if he tries again? I really don't want that to happen, but I know he will!"

"Then you shouldn't worry about it anymore, Kellen!" As soon as she said that, he grabbed her arm and spun her around to face him.

He looked at her with dark eyes and murmured, "You'll always be my concern, Lena. You'll always be."

Lena shook her head and squirmed. She let go of his arm. "No, Kellen, I won't," she responded firmly, hoping he would understand. "In case you forgot, our marriage is over now. There's nothing left between us."

His eyes glazed over with worry as he feverishly searched her gaze for a second before closing them as if he couldn't take the anguish longer. He leaned in a little and put his palm on the wall in front of him.

Lena stopped herself from reaching out to him and instead took a step back and away from his body heat, which was starting to seep into hers. She looked at the nursery door that was slightly open.

“I know this won't change anything from the past, but Lena—” he croaked. “I'm so sorry. I should have believed you. If not, I should have at least given you a chance. I should have at least doubted that those pictures weren't real... that...”

He stopped speaking in a broken voice, and she held her breath. Some memories had turned into nightmares for them, and it was still hard to talk about them, recall them, and not want to fall apart and die.

She tried hard not to let him hear her heavy breathing with her eyes wide open. She was shocked that she was able to do it.

He turned his head and glanced up at her, and the look in his eyes made her feel bad. He implored her, “Will you ever be able to forgive me?” as if he were begging for his life and it was just in her hands.

“Why won't I forgive you when I forgave Ryan?” she said. “Because he was wrong, too, for pushing you too hard and getting a kick out of it. Why won't I forgive you when I've forgiven myself? For not staying back, for not seeing how Ryan's teasing was hurting you, for not standing up for myself and hitting some sense into your stupid head.”

Lena had heard that everyone in the world has their own aura and that no two auras are the same. It seems like a circle around a body, like an unseen area, maybe of the

soul. She had also heard that if someone stays in that aura circle for too long, the auras start to share attributes with each other. Lena thought that something like that had been going on since she met Lola. She was now talking like her and really meant it.

What would have happened if she had hit Kellen in the nose that night instead of falling apart like a broken fortress?

Kellen didn't say anything for a good five seconds. He raised his eyebrows and looked like he didn't know what to do with what she said. He only murmured, "Lena—" "Are you saying—" he started, his eyes wide with surprise and then hope. "Are you saying that you have forgiven me?"

Lena nodded yes, and before the optimism in his eyes could turn into anything more, she said, "But that's all I have to give you. Nothing more. No more."

Someone had kicked him in the gut, and he almost fell back. In only a few seconds, the hope in his eyes faded, leaving only fear and despair. He was breathing in and out like he was going to die, and he was opening his lips to say something that she was going to deny. She couldn't go back and look at something every day that would always remind her of the agony and uncertainty that never went away.

Damien's roar was so loud in her ear that she couldn't even hear him speak. And then, with a hard shove, she and Kellen were both thrown to the ground. Damien's body followed them and landed on top of her awkwardly, but not before a whoosh and the sound of the window smashing into bits.

What the hell? They were standing exactly there in front of that window!

"F**k!"

She heard Kellen swear and felt Damien trying to get his body away from her. He moaned as he did this, and it sounded like he was in a lot of pain.

Damien inquired quickly, “Are you okay, Lena?” Kellen, who was frightened, helped him sit up while perspiration dripped down the sides of his face.

At that point, she saw blood running down Damien’s right arm. She took a startled gasp.

Damien wasn’t harmed; he was shot in the head.

It appears like he took the gunshot that was meant for her.

“The bullet just went through my arm; it didn’t stay in,” Damien replied with a smile as he gazed at Lena. “And it didn’t even hit the bone. Lena, stop worrying. The lines on your forehead are making my head hurt now.”

Lena blinked and opened her mouth to say something, but Damien spoke first.

Damien gave her a stern look and said, “And don’t even think about saying it’s your fault because it’s not.”

His eyes told her that he knew precisely what she was thinking, as always.

How did he always manage to achieve this?

“Had it hit your bone, you might have lost your arm!” Lena shook her head, trying hard to get rid of the scary picture in her imagination. “What if you got hit in the heart or another organ? I could have lost you, Damien.”

When the police got there, they started a full investigation into the orphanage. The

event was spoiled. At least they were at the end of the day, and in a strange way, the media attention made the orphanage quite popular.

They scanned the buildings around them right away, focusing on the higher ones in the direction of the red laser pointer beam that Damien had seen coming from. Finally, proof was obtained on the roof of a building, indicating a sniper had been there.

At the earliest, the police decided that someone had put a hit on her.

Lena understood that Kellen was correct. There was also no question who was behind this.

Lena felt a shudder down her spine.

It seems like the Arthur genes had a lot of crazy people in them who did crazy things for love and retribution.

When Lena saw Damien looking at her with a blank look on his face, her eyes narrowed.

“What?” she said, touching her forehead and then her cheek. “Is there something on my face?”

He seemed like he was going to snap out of it. His cheeky smirk came on in no time. “No,” he said, clearing his mouth. “So... you and Kellen?”

“Don’t act like that,” Lena said with a squint. “That you didn’t hear it all.”

She was shocked to see the tips of Damien’s ears become crimson. “Okay, I did,” he said, shrugging and plucking at the edge of the bandage on his hurt arm. “And thank

God for that; you are safe now.”

“Damien!” Lena yelled at him, remembering again how stupid it was for him to jump in front of her to get that bullet.

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He raised the corner of his mouth and gave her a friendly grin to make things better. “Don’t worry, babe! If you had lost me,” he said with a twinkle in his eye. “Then I would have still come back to you, but as a ghost. Picture me sneaking about your apartment and frightening the heck out of you every once in a while.

Lena’s brow twitched, which was something she often did when she was about to get angry or laugh.

She hit his good arm hard with her lips pressed against the grin.

“Not funny,” she remarked while pretending to frown.

“Ah, but it was so bloody scary when I took you and Lola to see that horror movie. What was the name?” He stopped to think for a second.

“I didn’t scream like Lola!” she yelled back, her eyes angry and her smile wide.

“I beg to differ,” he said quietly.

She hadn’t really yelled; she had only gasped in amazement every time the ghost had suddenly appeared out of nowhere. Damien would still make fun of him, though. It was still a surprise how he knew and leaned in every time she gasped and whispered, “Scared?” in her ear.

“Besides,” Damien said with a sigh, leaning back a little deeper onto the cushion. “A psychic in my hometown told me that I would die by drowning in the water, not by getting shot or something.”

Lena made a face. “A psychic?”

Damien clicked his tongue. “Just a strange gypsy woman my mom knows. Mom has a crazy group of friends, and you wouldn’t believe how out of the ordinary things get when I go home for a party or dinner.”

Lena was prepared to ask more about the psychic, the drowning, and her mother’s strange parties. A charming frown that showed both fear and interest appeared on her brow. But then a staff member brought hospital food.

Damien made a frown at that, and Lena laughed and said, “Oh hell, it’s your turn to eat the good food now.”

Kellen sniffed as the cold wind blew dust into his nose. His eyes shot skyward, and just as he had thought, there were clouds.

What went wrong with this city, with Velden?

People here would get rained on out of nowhere, no matter what time of year it was. In Brooklyn, it didn’t rain like this. Rain was only allowed in certain seasons. People would know what to expect and how to get ready for it. On the other side, Velden was more like a place where things happened that you didn’t anticipate, like grunts in the sky, clouds getting darker, damp trickles down your shoulder, a strong chilly air, and the sense of being caught off guard and frantically looking for shade.

Kellen shuddered and had goosebumps on his arms when the first drip hit his right cheek. He had never had this response before.

He took a few steps back, then turned around and ran up the steps and into the hospital building. He didn’t stop till the gentle rain ended.

The police officer who was with him was a few steps behind.

The officer took off his hat and shook it hard to get the stray drips of water off. “A police car will patrol past her apartment building every half hour,” he continued.

Kellen took a step back since he didn’t want to get wet.

But why was his throat growing so dry?

Kellen frowned and said, “That doesn’t sound like a good enough security measure to me.” “What if she gets hurt in those thirty minutes?”

The officer responded, “We checked the security of her apartment, and it seems good enough. There are CCTV cameras and a security guard sitting just inside the entrance on the ground floor.” “Look, if you still think we’re not doing enough, then please, by all means, hire a bodyguard from one of those professional detective and security companies.”

Kellen’s lips were squeezed together tightly. The notion made his skin crawl and his stomach slump in shame. He couldn’t take care of the lady he loved anymore, and he couldn’t get the things he needed to protect her anymore, either.

His condition was like a disability, and the painful awareness was like a heavy weight on his shoulders, dragging him down all the time.

Once upon a time, he had everything, and for the most part, he didn’t appreciate all that money. He now knew what it was like to be virtually broke.

But it wasn’t like a middle-class man couldn’t save his girlfriend; it was just a lot harder.

Every fight becomes like trying to stop a tsunami without money.

Kellen was learning the hard way.

The officer had told him that they were finally going to question the senior Arthur. They trusted Kellen's screams more after the shooting.

Kellen sat down on a stretcher that was close to the wall next to the cantina after the cop departed. He stared blankly at the escalators that never stopped moving. The rain outside the hospital's glass front had increased up speed, and it gave him chills that were more than just a bodily reaction. His arms were still covered with goosebumps, and his crazy mind told him that he would never be the same again.

Kellen was so buried in his thoughts, or lack of them, once that sudden urge hit him that he didn't even realize that an hour had gone by. He didn't care about time, and every day, he learned that there was joy in this. This... He just sat there, doing nothing and letting his thoughts go wherever they wanted, not caring about the world that was spinning around him.

He just came back to his senses when he smelled Lena's familiar perfume and saw her. He looked up and saw her coming toward him. He focused on her face, which was inclined to the side, and saw that the area beneath her eyes was dark. He hadn't seen the brightness in her face since he had seen her at the orphanage until she heard him play the guitar.

Kellen inquired, "How's he?" when she stopped in front of him.

"Okay, now he has to stay here tonight. The doctors want to make sure he doesn't get a fever or an infection."

They stood there for an entire minute without saying a word, staring out the glass in

front of the hospital at the rain outside.

Kellen turned away first, flinching. Lena, on the other hand, still looked to be in some kind of haze.

“You should go back to your hotel now.” She didn’t seem to be too lost in reality, though. You can’t always trust what you see.

He responded, “You should also go back to your apartment.”

Lena nodded.

Visitor hours were finished; therefore, she wouldn’t be able to see Damien until tomorrow. But he was scheduled to be released tomorrow morning, so... Lena was going to be here for sure, and it was certain that she would take Damien home with her.

Kellen let out a sigh.

Lena agreed to let him take her home, which was a relief for him because he had thought she would say no and was ready to fight for her as much as he could. But he didn’t need to. He could tell when she let her tiredness show on her face by looking at her out of the corner of his eye. That made sense. She was too tired to resist just now.

They spotted Lola at the hospital’s front stairs, soaked like a stray cat in the rain that was becoming worse. They, too, tried to take her home with them, but this one had enough power left to snap and claim she was great where she was and needed to stay there. Things like that.

Lena didn’t let Lola sit, of course, so the girl wouldn’t get seizures because it was too chilly.

Lena had said, “Then I’m going to sit here with you until you stop wanting this craziness.” The threat worked effectively.

Kellen understood that Lena would die for her friends. In the past, that part of her made him envious, but now that the worst was done, he viewed it in a manner that made him feel proud.

Some adjustments are meant to happen a bit too late.

“It doesn’t sound like a good idea,” Lena remarked, her voice getting weaker. Lola was a very silent creature who was tightly attached to Lena’s elbow. Lena didn’t know who was supporting who.

Kellen grumbled and looked blank. “Why? Because you think it will be weird to have your ex-husband stay at your house for a night?”

Lena said, “I’m surprised how well you can read my mind, Kellen.” She was being sarcastic, and she knew that both of them were hurting each other with the interchange.

Before, Kellen had stopped before his hotel and ordered the two women to wait in the car while he ran away without providing Lena any kind of response when she asked what was going on. Not long after, he came out with a lot of baggage in his hands. A hotel employee followed him with more bags and suitcases, which they put in the trunk of the car.

Kellen had just said, “I’ve just checked out,” in response to Lena’s perplexed look.

“Don’t worry,” he said when he saw that she was worried. “I only want to stay the night at your place. I’ll leave tomorrow.”

“Excuse me! I don’t remember asking you to spend the night.” Lena had moved up in the backseat while Kellen pulled off into the road.

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He groaned doubtfully, “Lena...” “I don’t really trust the police’s plan for your safety. Isaac is dangerous, and you need to trust me now.”

There was silence between them for a minute after that, but then Lola spoke for the first time since leaving the hospital. “To protect Lena, you had to leave the hotel completely? It sounds like you’re going to move in with her.”

After another full minute of stillness, Lena held her breath until Kellen’s tense shoulders slumped in the driver’s seat in front of her. “I’m going to stay in a cheap motel.”

Back to now, Lena was still quite confused as she unlocked the door to her flat... not wanting to trust what it sounded like it was going to be. She knew that Isaac had hit Kellen back hard and that his business was going down. But didn’t he have any money saved up for himself? She understood that practically every businessman had a backup plan, and even though they sometimes go bankrupt, they always find a way to get back on their feet.

It sounded so strange to her that Kellen might be dragged down to his knees like that. The second option, that he was only attempting to find a method to get into her house, looked better.

That night, dinner was short and quiet.

Lola sat next to Lena at her little, square kitchen table. Lena saw her picking at the food on her plate instead of eating. Kellen, on the other hand, was sitting across the table and completing the task of biting, chewing, and swallowing in a rather robotic

way.

Lena let out a sigh. “Hey, I know the tuna fish sandwiches aren’t that great because I made them quickly, and the tuna was just cut out of the can. There’s some pasta in the cabinet, so I should probably cook it, but you guys need to wait a little while—”

Strong voices interrupted her at the same time.

“That’s not true!”

“Not a chance!”

Lola and Kellen looked at each other and tried again.

“This tuna is so good.”

“I love everything you cook.”

Both of them moaned in annoyance. Lena’s eyes got bigger.

“Damien’s arm is toast, and I’m still shocked.”

“I’m just worried about what Isaac might do next.”

Lola grumbled, and Kellen puffed.

“Stop it!”

“Talk to you later!”

Lola flung her arms up in anger, and Kellen crushed the sandwich in his hand.

Lena shook her head and smiled. “Okay, everyone, let’s just enjoy what we have on our plate right now,” Lena replied hurriedly before their tuned-up chatting started again.

Yes, they did. Again, quietly. And they thought this was better.

Kellen cleaned the dishes even though Lena didn’t want him to.

Instead, he had replied calmly, “Go, take your medicines, Lena,” and gently swatted her hands away as they reached for the sink. “Go to bed now and take your medicines. You’ve had a long day.”

Lena stood next to him and took a step back. It was easy to detect that he didn’t clean the dishes very often because she observed him do them. When they were together, they always had a maid. He had a maid come to his flat twice a week while he resided there.

She quickly exited the kitchen the next second after turning around. It was strange to see him do anything like wash the dishes. It felt so private like they were playing home again and not how it used to be.

Lena took off her bandana and went to bed, letting out a sigh of relief. She was sliding into the comforter when she heard Lola’s voice and stopped.

“People would comment, “You’re getting much too used to being bald.”

Lena’s mouth turned up at the corners. She put her palm on her head and felt the little hairs that were already breaking out from the velvety smoothness. “Well, I guess so. After the initial misery and shyness wear off, it feels strangely freeing not to have to deal with all that hair and the extra work of cleaning and caring for it.”

Lola moved around on the side of the bed where she had been sleeping. She had chosen to remain the night because Lena had asked her to.

“Because of you, Lena, I want to shave all my hair off.”

Lena merely smiled and sank into the warm pillows. For a time, her mind drifted to the couch that Kellen had claimed for the night.

“Lola—” Lena called a few minutes later when their breathing got too loud.

When we’re too weary or drowsy, we’re more likely to stay up for hours after going to bed, feeling angry that sleep won’t come. The brain is so cruel; it never shows pity for the body’s pain.

Lena had privately called it the “owl syndrome.”

“Hmmm...” Lola’s voice was muffled since the comforter was over her face, and the end of it was tucked snugly under her head. If you didn’t pay close attention to her breathing, you would be scared since her whole body was straight.

Lena laughed as she saw that her friend’s way of sleeping seemed more like a dead body lying peacefully. She had heard that how someone sleeps shows who they really are. So, what does Lola’s way of sleeping say about her?

Lena remarked, “I wanted to ask you something,” but she was a little apprehensive.

“Go ahead and ask,” Lola said. “Please don’t ask me to marry you.”

She inquired gently, “Do you like Damien?”

There was a lengthy gap, and it seemed like Lola had really stopped breathing.

Lena's thoughts went back to the phone call she had with Ryan earlier. The guy was crazy out there in Brooklyn when he heard about the attacks on her. Lena had to work hard and for a long time to calm him down and talk him out of booking the next trip to Velden. But what was shocking was that he cleared his throat and questioned her about Lola at that point. Wondering how she was doing.

The question seemed common, but Lena remembered Ryan's additional attempt to make it normal.

And then there was Lola. Lena had never seen the woman so upset, silent, and not like herself before.

Why can't feelings ever be simple? And why do they have to be abandoned so often? Not wanted?

"Lola?" Lena screamed out again when her friend's body was covered from head to toe and didn't answer.

"Shh, Lena! I'm sleeping."

Lena leaned back into the pillow with a sigh of laughter. She was too tired to start an argument by saying that a sleeping person couldn't possibly answer.

Certain inquiries must go unanswered, and certain secrets must stay hidden.

Lena's plans didn't work out the way she hoped they would.

Damien did get out of the hospital the next day, but then his mother called him. She raced to Velden when she heard that her son had been shot. It was clear that Damien had to go back to his own apartment immediately. And he did it, but he looked like he didn't want to.

Damien requested, “Come inside?” as she dropped him off. His eyes were a little fatigued, but he looked at her with the same kindness as always.

“I’ll definitely come by later to meet your mother. For now, let’s give her some time alone with her son. She must be stressed,” she remarked with a smile before getting back in the car and waving farewell.

Kellen chose to stay at Lena’s for a few more days because of what was going on.

“Once again, Kellen, I’m sure I can handle things on my own,” she said.

Kellen grumbled back. “I’m not going anywhere until Isaac is completely out of the picture.”

“But he’s in police custody and being questioned right now, isn’t he?” she said angrily.

Kellen just growled again and walked over to the restroom. He said over his shoulder, “But his hitmen aren’t, are they?”

Lena couldn’t say anything back to it.

Lola was back to her normal self since that morning, which was unexpected. And Damien never got to see how crazy she had been the day he was shot.

Lola didn’t even go with Lena when Damien left the hospital. She went to the boutique instead, saying that the business needed at least one top-notch, responsible individual.

Lena could practically feel the layers of skin and flesh on her body peeling off in the afternoon. That may be because Kellen was there, quietly brooding in her modest

apartment. So, she even made the decision to go to the shop.

Of course, Kellen's car was behind her, but it stayed a good distance away from the cab she was in.

What was he attempting to do? Being secretive? Well, then, he was doing a terrible job at it.

At least it wasn't as unpleasant as when they were stuck in her little apartment with the aura of unresolved issues hanging around.

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“Why the f**k are you here?” Lola yelled at Lena as soon as she saw her walk into the store. “You were supposed to stay home and rest.”

Lena shrugged and went into her little office in the rear. Lola stayed very close behind. “I’ve gotten better. Yes, I’m still weak, but trust me, Lola, it’s not going to kill me.”

Lola snorted. “You’re one of the sweetest people, Lena, but that doesn’t make you any less stubborn. It’s as annoying as diabetes, you know.”

Lena didn’t say anything. She merely slipped behind her desk and started to move the modest stack of paperwork about without any real purpose. Lola stood quietly the whole time, with her hip against the desk.

Lena had a feeling she needed to say something, and it may be very important. And after a few long minutes of stillness, she was proven right.

“About...” Lola said, clearing her voice. “Last night, Lena, what you asked...”

Lena stopped. At last.

“Yes,” Lola said with a sigh. “I like him. I like Damien. But then again, who doesn’t? But you know what? It’s not that all-consuming, novel-worthy kind of like-like. Oh, how do I explain it?” She stopped for a second and wrung her hands in frustration.

Lena listened patiently and never interrupted.

“Have you ever had a crush on one of those cheesy, hunky heroes in the movies or TV shows or something? Like, you freaking want to have someone like that in your life, and you daydream about it a lot. This feeling is not real, and it’s more because of the fact that you live the idea of being loved by someone so impossibly wonderful like that. Yeah, that’s what I feel. I’ve been the witness to how Damien healed you, how he takes care of you, the way he looks at you. Lena, I want someone to look at me like that. Because come on, look at me. No matter how much I try to deny it, it’s true that I’m bloody getting old. I just ripped off a grey hair this morning,” Lola informed with wide eyes as if she was struck in fear just by the memory of her grey hair. “And even though I say I’m fine alone, I am, but that’s not what I want when I see Damien looking at you.”

Lena’s facial muscles froze, then let go and turned into a frown. Looking at you... Lena shook her head, saying no to the plan. “Damien only sees me as a friend, Lola,” she said slowly. “And maybe what you want so badly is already just an arm’s length away. You just need to open your eyes and see it.”

She thought of Ryan and realized she shouldn’t take things any further. It was still too early. And things might go wrong before they even start.

She smiled to herself as she saw Lola’s face wrinkle up in intense contemplation.

It was the finest thing she could do for her pals.

The next morning, the sun shined on Velden in the brightest way, making it seem like there was no evil anyplace on Earth. But Lena was smarter than that. There were layers of darkness behind the dazzling brightness, waiting for the next careless move of an unsuspecting victim.

Kellen followed her like a good little boy whenever she left the safety of her apartment. And she decided to keep her thoughts to herself about it. Kellen was aware

that she was aware. When he walked into her apartment just a few minutes after she had last night, it was clear in his eyes. It was strange how calm they both were about it as if there was an unwritten agreement between them.

Lena had generally stayed quiet because of the weird sight behind Kellen's calm eyes. She knew him well enough to recognize that the feeling was pain, and the amount of it seemed unbelievable.

For a long time, she had been able to read Kellen like a book, both when he was happy and when he was sad. Things had changed a lot, yet she knew that certain things remained the same.

She had been injured, shattered, and beaten in the past, but none of it could make her heartless, especially when that heart had belonged to the same guy for so long and so completely.

She also thought it was stupid to kick someone who was already bleeding a lot.

Lena walked up to Damien's apartment door, which she knew well. She took a deep breath and then knocked on the wood surface with her knuckles, first softly and then more firmly.

When the door opened a little bit, she saw a woman's face, maybe in her late fifties. Then the door opened all the way.

Lena had no idea that wrinkles could make someone seem so good. The wrinkles on the woman's face gave her skin character, and the lines around her eyes and lips made her look quite kind.

There are some people in the world who will always make you feel good about yourself. These folks are a vacation from the poisonous world and its constant

attempts to pull us down.

One of them was Damien's mother, Sophia. Lena learned about it in the following few minutes when the mother took her into her son's house. In a hurry, Lena sat down at Damien's dining table with a happy Sophia and a platter of freshly made cookies and hot tea.

Lena smiled and remarked, "You've really taught Damien well, Sophia." "He cooks like a pro."

She laughed as Damien's ears turned a little pink.

Sophia winked, nevertheless, and seemed proud. "I know, dear, I've raised him well. Now my life will be complete only if he takes charge, marries a nice girl, and has the grandchildren I've been dreaming about for so long."

"Mom!" Damien yelled as the redness swiftly spread down his cheeks.

Lena smiled, which showed that she was having fun. "That would be great," she said in a mocking tone.

But then, for a brief moment, Damien and Sophia looked at one another, and their features became serious. It was impossible to tell if she had made it up or read the moment wrong.

Lena gazed down at her hand as she dipped a cookie halfway into her teacup. She didn't know that she had been eating the cookie like this. She had done it before, as a youngster, and she had done it at the wrong moment.

She raised up the wet cookie with a look of shame on her face, but it broke in half and fell into the tea, spraying some of it around. Lena was horrified to see the melting

cookie piece slowly sink.

She moaned as she heard others laughing around her.

Sophia's voice was soothing as she said, "It's okay, dear." "Being yourself is fine, so you should never be afraid of it."

Damien reclined back in his chair in a way that made him feel better and smiled at Lena as she glanced up at him.

"I won't be scared," Lena replied as she reached for another cookie and dipped it in the tea the way she liked it.

Sophia clapped her hands. "That's just great!"

Later, while Damien was taking Lena home, they stopped at the closed door.

Damien looked across the kitchen, where his mother was fumbling around after saying goodbye to Lena. "Will you go to the next hearing of the case?"

Lena nodded. "Yeah. The lawyer was saving me for last. I guess he's making the case more interesting by putting the witnesses and evidence in this order. Anyway, I just hope this is the last hearing. I can't wait for that woman to get a proper sentence for everything she did to me," she said, taking a shaky breath and looking to the right. "To Kellen..., to us."

She looked back at Damien's face as she heard him remark, "That horrible thing will get what she deserves, Lena, and her father too. The monstrosity runs in the family, and it needs to be stopped."

Lena agreed completely. Her lips were squeezed together in a tight-lipped grin of

anger and hope.

Even if her history had broken her heart, it couldn't poison it. It had made her stronger in ways she was beginning to see, little by bit.

Lena headed to the boutique after seeing Damien. She was determined not to let Lola do all the work and get tired. Lena recognized that while the girl seemed like she was full of energy, she was really a very sweet and sensitive woman.

The core is going to be softer if the shell is firmer.

Lola literally threw Lena out of the store when it was almost eight, and it was becoming darker outside. She told Lena to go home right now.

“Did you forget that you have a radiotherapy session tomorrow night? You need to save your energy, Lena. Or do you want me to call Damien, who only has one arm, so he can drill some sense into your pimply head?”

Lena flew out of the store right after that, of course.

Lola had already phoned for a cab. But, as usual, it was taking its own sweet time to get there. The authorities definitely needed to pay more attention to Velden's cab service.

Lena stood on the sidewalk and rubbed her arms. The wind was a little chilly, and it hurt her skin. She gets chilled very readily because of her health problems. Dr. Robert had said that it would stay the same till her body was fully healed.

She looked to the left and right to see whether Kellen was still there. After that, she rolled her eyes. Of course, he was. She thought he could be maintaining a considerable space between them and trying his best to be covert.

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It was odd because it felt like they were playing hide-and-seek. And they were going to win the game for sure after they presented a good case against Isaac. Kellen would go back to South Hills, and everything would continue on as usual.

She was in the process of letting out a sigh when she saw a figure emerging out of the shadows of an alley a few feet distant. Her eyebrows furrowed, and her body tightened in readiness. Her gut told her that something bad had come out of the darkness. And that gut feeling was accurate when Isaac Arthur's face came into view beneath the bright lights of the street.

Her brows relaxed, but her eyes got bigger in disbelief.

"You..." she began, whispering to herself. "You were supposed to be in police custody."

When she saw Isaac's lips curve into a devilish smile—or was it a sneer?—her insides twisted in horror.

"Well, what a surprise!" Isaac remarked. "I think I have my ways of getting out of jail, and that's all I need to get back at the woman who ruined my daughter's life."

Lena gasped when Isaac's hand delved into his coat and pulled out a revolver.

"Can't trust anyone else to do the job." His pupils shone with resolve.

Lena took steps back that made her trip, even though she knew she could never be quicker than a bullet.

Lena's startled eyes stayed on the gun's barrel, and her feet moved back without her meaning to after that first stride.

Isaac, on the other hand, stayed where he was, unimpressed. Why bother when the Bullets were happy to do what he said?

Her pulse raced as she saw him tighten his hold on the rifle. His jaw became rigid as he focused.

Her instincts went all over the place.

This was the time. He was going to pull the trigger immediately.

A scream rose from her b****t, but it got trapped in her throat as soon as his curled finger started to pull back the trigger.

But suddenly, as the gunshot rang out in the night, a masculine body sprung on Isaac with a roar, coming up from behind him in the dark.

Lena heard the sound of a gunshot flying by her shoulder, just missing her. She fell to her knees with a guttural shriek of fear. She saw Kellen's face in a blur and watched him pull Isaac's hand quickly to an awkward angle.

The agonizing crunch proved that the arm was fractured. Lena jumped and put a palm over her lips.

Isaac yelled in shock and anguish. The pistol had already slid out of his fingers a long time ago. He tried to get away from Kellen's hold, but it was too tight, so he tried to attack with his one decent hand.

Kellen didn't waste any time; his fist sailed through the air and hit him hard in the

face. He didn't stop there, though.

It was like he was possessed... by rage, sadness, and just plain insanity.

Lena was shocked and remained half-kneeling on the ground, looking at the sight and breathing heavily in anger. Kellen knelt over Isaac's scarcely moving corpse just a few feet away from her and hit him with his fists as hard as he could without stopping.

Isaac had been moaning and whimpering for a while, but Kellen's constant attacks made his body cease moving.

Lena gasped and quickly got up. She said, "Kellen!" and ran toward him with trembling legs.

Kellen didn't appear to hear a word, though. His face was twisted in wrath as he focused only on pounding Isaac until there was nothing left of him. Kellen didn't even seem to realize that Isaac wasn't moving at all.

Lena stopped directly next to Kellen and tried again to get his attention. "Kellen. Stop!" But it didn't work.

She saw the sorrow on his face, the way his eyes shone with angry tears, and the way his mouth twisted into an angry grimace. His hair was damp and stuck to his forehead in a messy way, and sweat was dripping down the sides of his face.

Lena had never seen Kellen like this in all the years they had known one other. And she could see and feel how strange it all was. Something inside him had broken. Something had come apart.

Before he was gone forever, her shaking hand still extended out.

“Kellen...” When her shaking fingers touched the sweaty flesh on the back of his neck, he stopped moving.

Isaac’s face twitched just a little bit, which made Lena sigh with relief because she knew the creature was still alive. But for how long... that she didn’t know. His condition was simply too bad.

“We... we need to call the cops...” she said, but then she stopped in the middle of her sentence as she saw Kellen looking down at his bloody hands with a blank look on his face. He had never looked her way before.

He looked like he had stopped breathing, and his shoulders were tight.

Then he started wiping his hands over his shirt as if he was trying to get rid of all the blood on them as quickly as possible. He kept saying “No, no, no” under his breath, and his breathing was harsh and frantic as if he were getting rid of something worse than what was really going on. But all he did was get a messier coat of red paint all over himself.

Lena’s stomach hurt so much that she couldn’t stand it. Her heart hurt to see it. She didn’t know what to do just then. She might hold him in her arms or try to rouse him up from the spell he was in.

No, God! What has happened to Kellen?

It was like being locked in a nightmare that would never stop, lost in a circle of bad things that kept happening.

Why would fate do this to them?

Why them?

After Isaac's stunt to kill Lena, the court's process for giving Selene's judgment sped up a lot. Selene, on the other hand, was taken out of the courtroom and put behind bars for many years while Isaac was in a hospital ward, having treatment for the severe damage Kellen had done to his bones and facial muscles.

The Arthurs were ruined.

Even though justice had been done, Lena still couldn't feel the hole in her heart closing. She felt like she had won, and she enjoyed the taste of retribution, but she knew it would never bring back what she had lost.

She knew he felt the same when she saw Kellen's shiny eyes flutter away from her. Damien, Lola, and Ryan, who had raced back to Velden to attend the hearing, applauded and clapped. But only she and Kellen, who were seated far apart from each other, had the same look of sorrow.

Lena expected Kellen would come up to her when he was done talking to the lawyer, but instead, he left without saying anything, which proved her incorrect. She kept looking at his back as he walked away till she couldn't see him anymore.

Damien's happy voice pulled her out of whatever universe she was in. "Let's go."

She nodded up at him and smiled back as he did.

The night sky was full of stars that were so beautiful and mysterious that Lena wanted to run toward them even more. Their secrets were so far away that they were impossible to attain.

People stay going because they have unmet wishes.

“Close your eyes! Now.” Damien’s hurried instruction from next to her made her grimace.

“Why?” She moved a little on the grass they were sitting on.

He rolled his eyes and pointed at the small ball of light moving between the millions of frozen stars, some of which twinkled and some of which were completely motionless. “Can’t you see that shooting star?”

“Oh,” she said, blinking at the teasing gaze he gave her. She laughed and closed her eyes. But she realized that doing so helped her see better. Wishes shone like fireflies behind her eyelids, drawing her in and making promises that made her want more and more. There was the loss and the past, but there was also the future calling to her in the night wind. She stood in the middle and waited.

A thumb lightly stroked her face, and she opened her eyes. Damien’s intriguing eyes, which had always fascinated her, gazed back at her with passion. She could almost make them out. But was she going to hear?

She looked at his face and said, “What?” She wanted him to talk. She owed him her life therefore she had to listen to anything he said.

But Damien remained quiet. For a long time, he looked at her as if he were trying to remember every nuance of her face. She thought, “Finally,” when his lips parted. But then he closed them up just as swiftly. His mouth turned into a grin that was something between sorrow and determination.

Words were gone for good.

“You’ve been waiting for Kellen.” It wasn’t a question.

She shrugged and turned her head away.

Gwen called to say that Dave's adoption paperwork was finally complete after over two weeks and getting the go-ahead from Dr. Robert that she was finally clear of the malignant mass in her brain. It would be an understatement to say that Lena was quite happy with the news.

She was no longer sick, and being a mother was just around the corner.

She laughed and sobbed, and then she decided to have a party. There was a modest celebration at the orphanage to celebrate the happy occasion when the adoption papers were given to her. Gwen had said that she could take Dave home the next morning, and everyone around her seemed happy.

Lena had asked her close friends and coworkers to join in the fun, and she had also called Kellen to invite him over. She expected he would come because he was still in Velden and was sleeping in a motel, even though she hadn't seen him since they last met in court.

She didn't know how many times she had peered over her shoulder at the entrance during the whole party. But Kellen never showed up. And in her heart, she realized that everything was coming apart.

As she sat under the starry sky in front of the orphanage building, she tried in vain to get her thoughts together and do something with them.

Damien's query broke the silence: "Did he even call you back and say he wasn't

coming?”

She shook her head to say no.

“Hey, Dami!” Lola said too loudly as she suddenly appeared in front of them.

Damien groaned and ran a hand down his face. “Lola, I told you not to call me that.”

Lola let out an annoyed sigh as if she were the one who should be outraged. “Ryan says he’s going to take me away from your store and make me his personal tailor. He’s even offering me a lot of money for the job. What do you think? Are you ready to lose your best employee?”

Damien smiled and pulled out his phone. He started to type on it. “Who am I to stop you from being stolen by him?”

He was now more focused on the phone than on the angry woman who was virtually jumping on her feet.

Lola’s eyes blazed with anger. She glanced at him for a long second, which made Damien feel uncomfortable when he saw it.

“Fine then!” she eventually said, stamping her foot on the ground and hurting the grass below. Then she turned around and went, adding over her shoulder, “You’re a bore anyway, and it’s more fun to beat Ryan up.”

Crushes can come and go, but the thin line between love and hatred is sometimes worth the risk.

Lola’s loud and quick footsteps as she ran straight at Ryan made both Lena and Damien clutch their breath.

Damien's fingers suddenly wrapping around Lena's wrist made her let out her breath. She turned her perplexed gaze to him and saw that he was getting up, his expression full of determination.

"Damien..."

He said, "Let's go."

"Where to?" she asked in shock and fear as he pulled her up. And before she knew it, she was being rushed out of the orphanage. He held her wrist tightly the whole time, and he dragged her along with him as he walked and ran.

She asked him a couple more times, but he didn't answer.

As a taxi drove over at the curb, they got to the sidewalk in time. Lena's perplexity only grew as he walked toward the cab with her.

"Damien, your car is parked just two feet away. Why is this taxi here? Can you please explain what's going on?" She dug her heels into the ground to make them both stop.

Damien turned his back. He gazed at her in an odd way by tilting his head to the side. "Because you need to go to him," he added. "Go talk to Kellen."

Lena looked at Damien for a long time before shaking her head softly to say no.

He only grinned. "You know you need to. You both need this before the time comes when you can't anymore."

Always the smart friend.

Lena was breathing heavily now. She wanted to do it, yet didn't want to do it at the

same time. She was locked in a mystery. It was sad because she already knew what the last answer would be.

We can sometimes see where we need to go, but we're not bold enough to take a step toward it. Thank God for angels that push us to move when things are hard.

Damien gripped her shoulders and told her to get in the cab. He then closed the door lightly. He urged the driver to get going.

Lena couldn't believe how quickly everything transpired.

Her fingers stung from how hard she held onto the rolled-down window.

Damien started to rush next to the car as the motor started to grumble, and the car started to move. Lena gazed at him with desperation, her brows furrowed, wanting to cry but not being able to.

She screamed at him, "Why are you running?" so he could hear her above the sound of the motor.

Damien laughed, and the sound was full of feelings. "I don't know."

The cab was going quicker now, and it seemed as if Damien had gone crazy because he was moving his feet faster, too. Lena stuck her head out the window and looked at him while she pressed herself against the door. She was going to tell him to stop running, but then a white blur came dashing from the other side and smacked Damien, who didn't see it coming. Lena heard their twins screaming. She turned her head as far as it would go to see the horrible sight.

A woman in a white wedding dress lay on top of Damien's thrashing body on the side of the road.

Lena gasped. She wanted to see what would happen next, but her cab had already rushed by and gone to where she needed to go.

The motel's manager, an old guy with gray hair and a weak frame, informed Lena, "He hasn't left his room in three days." He coughed a few times and then spoke again, making his eyebrows furrow even more.

"My staff tried to find out what the hell was going on, but he wouldn't let anyone in. I was really going to call the cops right now. What if he's a criminal or a drug addict hiding in my motel?"

"He could be sick. Have you thought about that for once?" she said, trying not to show how angry she was by clenching her teeth.

He just said, "That too," with a raised eyebrow.

Lena ran to Kellen's room after learning the room number and acquiring the key to that room, which the management kept in case of emergencies. She thought it would come in helpful.

The motel was an old structure with four floors. The prices for the accommodations were really low here. That was what the sign at the front desk said. As Lena walked down the dark hallway, she thought of the most likely cause for that. It wasn't hard for her to figure out the cleanliness standards or the absence of them.

She got splinters in her palm and scraped off some flesh twice while grasping the banister and climbed up the creaking stairs as fast as she could.

She didn't stop for a second when she got to the room, even though she had a stitch in

her stomach and was breathing hard from racing so fast. It may also have been the terror that was swirling through her belly like the blades of a blender.

She took a deep breath and turned the key in the lock, getting ready for whatever was coming. The metal doorknob was rusted and frigid to the touch. She held her breath and pushed the door open.

It was dark.

She reached for the switch on the wall and flipped it, but it didn't work.

When did the lights go out in this room? She pondered, her gut twisted with worry.

Through the small, floor-to-ceiling crack that she thought was the door to a balcony, a little light, dull and disappointing came in. The fact that there was a light there made the darkness next to it appear much stronger.

The shadows are what make it spooky, not the utter black.

She held onto her tiny handbag with her fingers. She nervously pressed it on her hip, where the cloth practically dug into her bone. She went inside, leaving the door wide behind her. She could immediately feel her eyes getting used to the gloom. Now, she could see the shapes of the furnishings better. To her left, in the middle of the room, was a single bed. Next to it was a medium-sized tea table.

Before the bed, a chair fell over next to it. She gently moved up to it and peered at the little door on the right wall. She thought it might be the closet.

She could see the pool of water flowing from the balcony from where she was standing in the middle of the room.

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The rain was coming down hard outside.

The smell of the rain, which was filthy and moist, was quite strong outdoors. But suddenly, the motel's dirty smell made it go away.

“Kellen,” she yelled.

Be quiet.

She could tell that the bed was empty by straining her eyes. There was no evidence or sound of the guy she was looking for, yet she could still feel that he was there. She could never forget how to sense his presence.

You can't forget how to swim because you can't forget how to walk. Once someone learns them, they will always be there.

She yelled, “Kellen!” again, this time louder.

A faint rustling sound came from the side of the bed, where the darkest darkness masked the spot on the floor that was tight against the furniture.

“Kellen...” she muttered as she moved closer. The darkness moved a little bit further, but her narrowed, focused gaze saw it. She moved forward slowly, not because she was terrified but because she knew something unpleasant was about to come out.

At that same moment, lightning struck across the sky, and she was only a few inches away from the figure that was suddenly hidden in darkness.

The blinding flash of lightning lit up Kellen's body, and she gasped at the sight. He was curled up on the floor next to the bed where he had taped himself as if his life depended on it.

"Kellen!" she could only whisper his name as the lightning went away too quickly. He drowned in the dark again.

She quickly took out her phone and let the purse fall from her grasp. She turned on the flashlight and pointed it at Kellen. She sank to her knees after taking the last few steps to him. As soon as her fingers touched his hot forehead, he took a deep inhale. The temperature showed that he didn't have a fever, but he was shivering, and his skin was sweaty. His hair stuck down low on his forehead, almost concealing his eyes. They had gotten too big.

"What have you done to yourself?" She was crying. She cried and stroked his cheek with her fingertips. His jaw was rough, and when she touched his lips, they felt chapped. "What have you done?" she said again, her voice breaking in the midst.

Her hand went down to his arm, and she helped him sit up a little bit. His limp limbs made it easier for her, yet that same feature made her more anxious... to the pounding anxiety in her chest.

"You've come," he muttered, tasting his dry lips. His face curled up for a time, so it must have hurt. "Why?" He sounded like he was attempting to talk properly through a lump in his throat, but his voice was low and watery.

"Get up." She tried to assist him get up as she stood up, but she decided to feed him first. It looked like he hadn't eaten in days. Her palms found his suddenly thin hands, and the light from her phone made his gaunt jaw and sunken eyes stand out.

"No," he said, pulling her hands away. He sank back into the shadows again as Lena

leaned over him in disbelief.

“Kellen?”

“It’s raining. Look out there,” he remarked as if that explained everything.

“What...,” her voice trembled with fear. “What’s going on, Kellen? Please, tell me...”

He abruptly snapped, “I can’t stand it!” And he seemed weak. “Those cold drops... they are... they would... I don’t...” he stammered, not making any sense and without giving a reason. He stopped talking and seemed really angry.

Lena cried as she saw the guy she loved was ruined.

She had heard that the guilty person suffers more, but she could only see how much now.

“Get a grip, Kellen!” she said through her tears. “Please, you need to snap out of it.”

But what if it was too late? What if he was already too far away?

She gazed around the dark, dirty room in despair, even though her vision was fuzzy. “You have to leave!”

His blank tone cut through the sound of the rain in the background. “But this is the place I deserve. I can’t leave,” he murmured, and with each syllable, he sank more into the gloom. “Leave, leave!”

Her cries were taken away. She stopped moving.

Feeling guilty is bad for you. People who cut themselves feel quite guilty. People who kill themselves think they don't deserve to live. Our own imaginations tell us that we deserve nothing but what we are doing to damage ourselves. Only shame and misery count; reasons don't.

They claim that the devil lives in hell, but what if he really lives in our heads? What if we're already in that hell?

"No, you don't," she said firmly. "You don't deserve it. Don't you ever say anything else again!" She was breathing hard. She gripped her phone so tightly that it seemed like she was going to die.

Kellen gazed at her without blinking, and she was relieved that he was finally paying attention to her and not what had broken them apart. She gripped his wrist and gritted her teeth to keep from crying again as she felt the bones of the once-muscular arm.

When her sadness sought to drown her in a world with no way out, she was blessed to have friends. Kellen didn't have any. She could see why he got lost so easily.

She forced him to stand up by taking advantage of the fact that he was distracted by how she had changed. She held his wrist tightly the whole while she took him to the balcony.

He stopped with a gasp when his bare foot hit the puddle of water that was seeping from the open door. "No..."

"Trust me," she said this time, and she was determined to push aside the memories that were trying hard to come back.

His eyes were full of sadness and pain. He didn't say anything and kept looking at her. And she went out onto the balcony, where the rain poured down on them both

right away.

The cold almost made her head numb when she first felt the rain, but it got better after a time. She blinked a lot. The torrential downpour made it impossible to see anything. It was like a big shroud that was meant to keep them in. Kellen's hand was shaking in her hold, and when she moved to the side, she saw that his shoulders were shaking, too. The rain did a good job of hiding his tears if he was sobbing.

It must finish in the rain if it starts in the rain.

"You need to go back to Brooklyn," she murmured, trying not to cry.

He shook his head strongly to say no.

"You must," she said, turning to face him completely and forcing him to do the same. "Isaac's in jail. You can get back at least some, if not all, of what he took from you. But first, I'm going to assign you a counselor, Kellen. Don't argue; you need help!" she said in a whisper-yell as he shook his head almost violently. Her eyes begged him to listen to her, even if her voice was demanding.

"What is the point?" he said with a mournful laugh, his eyes burning.

"You can't live like this!"

He pulled his wrist out of her grip and turned away from her, leaning against the rusting railing. He let out an angry growl. "I can't live without you."

She got close to him, close enough that the rain wouldn't drown out her voice. "Look at us, Kellen," she remarked. "We're both hurting. Life has taught us so much through the storms and rains, but it has also hurt us over and over again. If we get back together before we heal completely, before we learn to breathe normally and get

our lives back on track, we'll just be setting ourselves up for another mess." She stopped to take a breath, which was a much-needed break.

She saw that his shoulder had stopped trembling. "Dave is in the picture now, too. He shouldn't have to live in a bad home. Let's get rid of this bad energy, Kellen because I don't want any of us to drown in it."

She smiled through her tears as she saw him chewing his lip and nodded in agreement this time.

He looked up and smiled back at her, saying, "I..." "I dream about our child a lot."

"I do, too," she said, and then she moved closer to place her forehead against his.

A second went by.

He muttered, "Can I come to see you sometimes?"

She nodded. "As friends and nothing more, until..."

He finished for her, "Later."

She let him kiss her one final time before drawing away so that the familiar and always-present sense of love wouldn't blind her again like it did years ago.

Because love should never be blind; it should always be a choice when feelings take over the head.

And heaven isn't a location. It is a state of mind that can't just show up out of nowhere; it has to be earned.

“Frustrating it is...” Dr. Robert had been mumbling to himself, appearing stiff and angry. When Damien cleared his throat, the unemotional genius looked up from the reports he was holding.

Lena took out a big breath.

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She recognized the look on the doctor's face. She had seen it once before.

It was clear that she was going to die again.

She laid her hand on Damien's fist on the recliner next to her. The guy was so nervous he was shaking.

"The disease has come back," the doctor remarked. "Yes, the tumor is cancerous."

Lena's breath fled her lungs.

"What!" Damien's voice, full of amazement, broke her heart.

The last time she was in this same doctor's office, getting the same news, she had a twisted, terrible desire to uncover all the answers and enjoy the chance to die.

Lena realized that she was missing that now.

Giving forgiveness had made her feel better. Then, after a long adoption procedure, bringing Dave into her life added color to it.

Her job also did well.

She had finished a few books.

Lena loved her life today and everything this lovely planet had to give her.

She had a lot to lose this time.

And this time, she had to deal with the fact that she was getting less of what she wanted the most.

Years went by...

From Lena's bedroom window, the water appeared huge. It was big, blue, and never-ending, just like the fight she had been having to stay alive for five years.

Dave slept soundly next to her, with the window between them.

The youngster was fatigued when he got home from school.

Lena gently ran her fingers over the silken hair of her tiny child. She thought about how quickly he had grown up as she looked at his sleeping face.

When she heard the doorbell ring, she got up slowly and tried to arrange her short hair as best she could with her hands. She liked this length more now, even if they had grown back.

When her cancer came back and they started giving her treatment again, all of her hair fell off. She was bald again. But then doctors told her that this time, there was a 98% probability that the side effects of the chemotherapy would kill her faster than the disease. Her body couldn't handle the same stress twice. Even though she was quite confident and worked hard, she was basically out of energy. If she was lucky or obeyed all the guidelines they gave her, like the Bible, they thought she would live for around five to 10 years.

So, she decided to live without the pain of chemotherapy.

She found out that it was Kellen who opened the door. But she wasn't shocked.

It was normal for him to show up a couple of times a month.

She understood it would be hard for him to get his firm back on track once it went through bankruptcy. But he would still make time to go all the way to Velden from South Hills.

"When did you get to Velden?" she inquired, moving aside to let him enter.

He went in and smiled at her, but it wasn't a full grin. "Right now," he said.

He strolled in and sat down on the couch, and she followed him.

"Did you eat lunch?" she said.

He shook his head, and she stood up again. "Then let me bring you some food."

He quickly said no, "You don't have to—"

"Don't worry. I'm not going to cook," she remarked as she opened the fridge door. "Damien made enough food for at least three days and put it in my fridge when he dropped Dave off."

"Is the paperwork done?" Kellen said as he got up and ran to Lena to assist her in heating up the meal in the microwave, even though she didn't want him to. "Please let me," he said. "You should go sit down—"

She tsked to show her disgust. "I won't die from doing a few chores around the

house—”

“Lena!” he yelled, stopping what he was doing. His body was tense all throughout. His eyebrows knit together, and a storm descended over his gaze.

She didn’t think he would take it so seriously. Not only Kellen but everyone around her would go crazy as she said the name of holy death. She thought she was that close to the end.

“Don’t you dare say things like that again!”

After he yelled, she looked at him for a little longer than she needed to and then sighed. The microwave made a noise.

When they sat down to dine, Lena answered Kellen’s previous inquiry about the papers. “It’s almost done. Damien and Ashley are going to be Dave’s parents. It was the right choice for him to live with them most of the time since I was diagnosed again. Dave will be fine.”

Lena held her heart and smiled sadly. She could depart in peace since she knew Dave was in good care.

Kellen was eating like a robot. He looked down.

Lena saw a drop of water run down his eyelid and hover there for a few long minutes before falling where his fingers met the spoon he was holding.

She wanted to wipe away all the tears from his skin with all her heart. But she didn’t.

Most of her preparations were finished.

Any day now. Any day.

She would be held by the angel of death with its icy, unbreakable grip.

She really wanted to live, but she could feel it in her bones that she wouldn't be able to prevent it this time.

The roses on her bed were precisely what she wanted. The white sheets and pillow under her were the same color as her skin. She seemed like she was one with the color as she lay there.

She was also quite thin. Her lower eyelids looked empty and purple. Her hands were together on her stomach.

Kellen saw that her fingers were almost as big as chopsticks.

It appeared like she was having a good night's sleep.

But was she really?

He couldn't shake the startling notion.

"L—Lena, are you sleeping?" he asked out in a quivering voice. He shook her gently and prayed that she would be well.

Lena stopped eating this month. She couldn't hold food in her stomach, so they fed her by putting a pipe down her nose.

The physicians had told her that her time was over. And even if they hadn't, Lena's

state would be enough to infer it. Her condition was becoming worse very quickly.

Kellen shook her again. This time, his blood pressure went up because he was stressed. All of a sudden, his eyes were crimson.

Oh God! What was he going to do?

But suddenly, their eyes opened and blinked. “Idiot, I’m still alive,” she exclaimed in a voice that was nearly too much to bear.

He couldn’t help but put his head on her bony shoulder and cry.

She attempted to call him by name, “Kellen,” and laid a delicate, icy palm on the back of his neck. “You need to stop falling apart like this. You need to stay strong and go on with your life after—”

A hiss of his breath in outrage stopped her from finishing her words.

Kellen held the bed sheet tightly in his grasp. He couldn’t do what she wanted him to do.

He could still breathe because he knew that no matter what their relationship status was, he would be allowed to see her again. She had already decided not to be involved with him romantically for an unknown period of time. They would both be on the same planet.

But now she was taking him to a place where he wouldn’t be able to see her again. And the day when he would finally lose her would arrive, whether it was today or any other day.

And then, the day arrived.

It was time for them to finally say goodbye, like a calm, cold, black beast coming straight from hell.

He could see her fading away through the fuzzy, wet curtain over his eyes.

He could feel her skin and bones in his gentlest touch. There was nothing left of her body. And she looked like she had suddenly fallen asleep all of a sudden. He had never heard a softer hiccup than her final breath.

He and all of her pals thought it was strange that the clouds had started to rain for a while.

Kellen thought about if it had poured like this when she was born. Lena had a strange, fatal connection with rain her whole childhood.

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She came into his life in the rain and went in the rain.

Kellen tucked her in for the last time in his life. He remembered that he had done it years before the mayhem started, when he had tucked her in when she was still alive.

His eyes were blurry and wet with thoughts, memories, and remorse. He let forth a scream that shattered his soul.

He didn't make any more noise after that.

We waste important parts of our life on things that don't matter. What if we knew that our loved ones were going to die soon? The funny thing is that we already know that.

At the funeral, Kellen sat silently in a corner. He heard Lola, Ryan, and Damien crying. What was the name of the girl Damien married? Even after trying to recollect a few times by going through his jumbled thoughts, he couldn't.

Dave sat down next to him and took his hand. The boy's eyes were big and afraid.

Goodbyes and death are terrifying, aren't they?

Kellen saw them drop Lena into her grave. He felt like he couldn't breathe and wondered how she was going to live beneath all that dirt.

That feeling of being trapped didn't go away after that.

He felt empty beneath the starry sky in the deserted graveyard when everyone else went, and he kept fighting everybody who tried to move him from there.

Even when Ryan and Damien arrived to get him hours later, he still felt empty. Or did they leave at all?

Nothing was obvious anymore.

He was glad they left him at Lena's flat. He liked being among her things, her smell, and her memories. People would come to see him. He never spoke to them.

They could sit there and look at him as much as they wanted and then go.

Then, one day, his head began to feel heavy. He had this awful, throbbing pain on one side of his head and shoulder. He was glad for the discomfort since it let him forget about the reality he was in right now. And the ache continued getting worse till he threw up. His one eye became blurry. He tried to rise up from kneeling in front of the toilet seat after throwing up, but he couldn't move his arm correctly. His tongue even felt like it had turned to lead.

He wiped his fingers across his top lip since the wetness was running down his nose.

Blood.

He was only amazed for a few minutes before darkness took over.

Death had never tasted so good.

Kellen and Lena

Lena had seen all of this before: the brightness, the gorgeous field with so many beautiful flowers, the tranquility, and the relief.

She had been here before. She could remember a little, but she couldn't say when.

Being here seemed so regular like she was meant to be here. But it seemed like a dream.

She was no longer a child, but she wasn't an adult either. Her body didn't want anything and didn't hurt, and her spirit didn't feel guilty.

She was running in a certain direction without thinking about it. But this time, the remote place on the horizon was unoccupied, unlike last time. But she could swear that her child, who she hadn't held yet, and her adoring parents were there.

Where were they now?

And she was shocked to see that her legs felt like they were made of lead. She couldn't move them enough. At one point, she was so annoyed with how sluggish she was going that she wanted to hurry up. But she didn't even think about quitting.

It was all just instinct.

Someone else joined her in this annoying marathon all of a sudden.

At first, she was scared, but when she saw it was Kellen, she calmed down. He was staring at her, and it seemed like he was grinning like a fool.

She turned to look at him. It made her stop moving her feet. But, funny enough, that didn't stop her from going forward.

Did they really have to sprint to get where they were going?

“Why are you here?” she said in a forceful voice. She was thrilled to see him, but she was also desperate since she had other important things to accomplish. It felt like a tug from something that was stronger than anyone could have imagined. It was like a basic instinct that went beyond any feelings, wants, or memories. Lena didn’t know how else to say it.

He shrugged. “I don’t know,” he continued as an afterthought. “But I think someone was nice to me.”

She frowned and wrinkled her eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

He didn’t say anything; he just shrugged again.

She saw that they were moving forward now and becoming faster. With this transition, the grass, flowers, and light surrounding them started to blur. Even more startling, her parents were now running with them. They didn’t say anything, but Lena’s mind quickly figured out that they were waiting for them—for this moment. Lena’s mother cradled Lena’s infant in her arms. Kellen was staring at him with interest. A bright white light led them to their goal.

Kellen had held Lena’s hand through all of this.

They wanted to hold the youngster, but they didn’t try to. It wasn’t the right moment. There was some kind of tight rule in this strange land during this strange period.

You could only find lost moments in timelines that were meant to be.

Lena felt her mind opening up to a knowledge that had always been there but had always been forgotten just as she stepped into the bright light.

Nothing actually comes to an end.

They had been freed from their world and were now living in a new one with new names, new destinies, and fresh chances.

Lena turned to look at Kellen, who was looking at her.

He responded firmly, “We’ll meet again,” but his voice trembled.

She smiled softly and nodded. “And we’ll love again.”

“It will be different then,” he remarked. “I will be better and smarter, and I will have faith.”

She gazed at him with hope and affection till she had to strip down for the after, getting rid of all her memories and feelings.

They went back to the universe just to be sent back.

There was a new story waiting.

Still, the curse of the living world was that it would always be full of hard tasks and tests. Because of the decisions we make at certain times, fated circumstances might go anyway.

Lola was completely in love with the young child Lena was holding in her arms. Lola smiled and grasped Dave’s hand gently. “What a nice blue coat you have on at your christening party.” “And you smell like ice cream, too. Any girl baby within 100 meters would definitely fall in love with you right away.”

Dave beamed up at Lola without any teeth, as if he knew everything and more. He peeked over his mother's shoulder.

Lena laughed with joy in her eyes. "Doesn't my boy look the most handsome today?" Dave turned his face toward her and grinned like a little boy when he heard her.

"Aw..." Lola put her hand over her heart. "Of course he is."

It had been two weeks since Dave was formally named Lena's kid. He walked into Lena's house and changed her life. Lola felt better and happy as she saw how the little bit of a person was gently pushing away all the sadness, worry, and gloom in her friend's life.

Another thing that made Lola happy was seeing Lena start to write.

Damien had told Lola several times that Lena used to adore writing fiction, like novels, in her notebooks. When he saved her from the street, he found a journal with her things. But all the bad things that had occurred to her took away that creative side of her. It was coming back to life now, like a phoenix.

Lena could frequently be spotted writing in her notebook during breaks or free time at work when there weren't many customers in the store. Her face would show a range of emotions, from darkening to playing to beaming.

Lola had secretly read a page or two while Lena went to the bathroom one day, just out of pure curiosity. She had started to weep. She made up her mind that she would always be there for Lena while she worked on her art. She still wouldn't read Lena's work again since the love, devastation, and heartache she wrote about were so real and powerful that they might destroy anyone's heart.

Lola didn't like to suffer or feel sad things in life. She had a purpose for keeping a

knife in her bra. If someone threatened her, they may get stabbed.

People today don't realize how much they damage others unless they are wounded in the same way. It's as easy as that: suffering for pain.

Lola had a good life because she followed her own ideals.

The happy music in the background made the night feel happy. People were rushing up to welcome the little star of the party and wish them well.

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Damien stepped over to stand with them and said, “Lena! Lola! And little man!” with a big smile on his face.

Lena said, “I told you to come early.”

Lola said, “I asked him to give me a ride!”

“Whoa! Hey, hey,” Damien stepped back abruptly. “Calm down, angry women! The thing is, a last-minute meeting came up. I didn’t even have time to text you the details except to cancel that lift,” he continued, staring at Lola. “And I’m sorry for that.”

Lena seemed thrilled. “A new deal!”

“Good job, Dami boy!” Lola clapped him on the shoulder.

Damien jumped. She may have put a little more effort into that apparent act of praise.

“No, it’s not a deal,” he said, shaking his head and smiling. And then they said, “For the first time ever, a top advertising agency is going to make an ad for us!”

“Really? That’s great!”

“Whoa! Oh my God!”

At the same time, Lena and Lola shrieked with joy. Dave lifted his small hands over his head and yelled, joining in on such an important and happy topic.

Lola said, “What agency is it?”

“Chimera,” Damien said, his eyes shining.

“Chimera!” Lena’s brows wrinkled in profound contemplation; she looked like she was searching her memory for knowledge.

“You’ve heard of them, right? They’re that well-known. And they only pick businesses that look like they have a lot of potential.”

Lena’s eyes suddenly got bigger. “Oh, I’ve worked with them before, not just heard about them.”

“What?”

“What!”

Now it was Damien and Lola’s turn to shout at the same time.

“I modeled in one of their ads,” Lena said, appearing a little apprehensive. She blinked, turned aside, and embraced Dave tighter.

“You used to be a model!” Lola couldn’t help but say. It seemed like someone had let me down. She had a buddy who was good at a lot of things, but he never told her about any of them. How many additional skills did Lena have? Really!

“Ah—it’s not like that, actually,” Lena said with a giggle that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I wasn’t a professional model. I just had to stand in front of the camera once and go through an experience I’ll never forget. Anyway—” she immediately shifted the subject. “Chimera has really great people working for them, which is why they are so successful. I’m so happy for you, Damien. You deserve the best.”

Damien smiled and nodded. “But not what I want the most.”

“Eh?” Lola’s face wrinkled in surprise. Why did it seem like she was missing out on some important information? What did Damien want the most? What did he never get? Why was he so vague?

Lena looked a little surprised and moved Dave to her other hip. Then she looked at the time on her watch. “We should cut the cake now.” Then she went to the hall to get the cake.

Lola looked at Damien and gave him a hard look.

“What?” Damien said, moving his feet and looking at Lola with an uncomfortable look on his face.

Lola instantly grabbed his tie and pulled him toward her. “Tell me what I don’t know.”

Damien jumped. “How can I know what you don’t know?”

Lola was quite angry. “Are you kidding me? You put hints in your answer to Lena.”

Damien grinned, but he was nervous. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Look over there—we’re missing out on Dave’s greedy attempts to reach that cake. I need to click some photos of this moment to show his future bride. Let’s go—” and he successfully ripped his tie out of Lola’s stone hold after absurdly failing twice.

“Don’t you dare run,” Lola said, and then she quickly turned around to catch Damien, but someone grabbed her arm and stopped her.

“Hey, crazy woman,” a man’s voice questioned. “Why are you trying to find that

poor guy? What did he do to you?” His voice was rough and warm, much like his touch.

Lola looked down and back at the long fingers that were curled around her thin arm. The man wore a silver watch on his wrist. She looked up at his face as the hand moved higher.

“Ryan!” Damien started to fade from her memory. “What are you doing here?”

Ryan lifted his eyebrow, which made a line on one side of his forehead. “It’s my best friend’s party,” he said without any emotion. “And I’ve known her longer than you have. Why shouldn’t I be at this party?”

Lola muttered, “That’s not what I meant.” You went back to Brooklyn.

“I can always come back when I want to,” he said with a big smile. “Velden is not anyone’s father’s property.”

Lola laughed.

So, he was giving her what she wanted—in her own words—what a cheap jerk.

While they were cutting the cake, Dave took a handful of cream before Lena could stop him. “Oh no!” “Oh no!” Lena said.

But everyone else appeared quite happy. They smiled, clapped their hands, and sang a baptism hymn that they had written and practiced ahead of time.

Even though Lola told them not to apply makeup with the cake instead of eating it, a too-eager, half-drunk employee from the shop placed the cream on Lena’s face nevertheless.

Lola was really angry. She quickly brought things back in order by pulling the worker by the shoulder.

Ryan's voice said, "There's no need to be so violent."

"That's how you set up law and order, you idiot," she shot back.

They laughed at the answer.

Lola ran to the bathroom right away to wash her hands because the employee had been sweating a lot. But when she got there, Lena was already there at the sink, of course, to wipe the cream.

But why was she clutching onto the sink like her life depended on it? And why did she appear so pale and like she was about to pass out?

"What's wrong, Lena?" "Lola quickly ran to her friend's side.

She had seen Lena like this enough times that she didn't want to remember them. That was a path she didn't want to travel down, like a nightmare.

"It's nothing," Lena had the nerve to remark. She was even sweating a lot.

Lola quickly took her scarf out of her bag and held it under the cool tap water. Then she rubbed the wet scarf against Lena's forehead and the back of her neck.

Lena sighed and said, "It feels good." I'm feeling better already.

"Let's see the doctor," Lola said.

"What? No. The party—

“F**k the party!” Lola was really angry. “Don’t tell me otherwise; your health comes first.”

Lena laughed. “I’m simply saying that we don’t need to spoil the celebration because I have an appointment with Dr. Robert the day after tomorrow. Also, this event must be what happened when I took one of those pills I had to take every day a few hours ago.

“Why would you get sick from taking the medicine you’re supposed to take every day?” Lola was completely lost.

“Uh, because I did what the instructions said not to do and took it on an empty stomach.”

Selene put her hands together and slapped them together in a mocking way as if the sky had suddenly become gloomy. “Wow. Wow! “Why the hell would you do something like that?” she said in anger.

“Forgot to eat because I was so excited about getting ready for the party.”

It was obviously an explanation that couldn’t be expected. So Lola yelled at her some more and told her to eat supper right after she got out of the bathroom. The party went well, with Damien and Ryan stepping up to take over the major roles from Dave.

Before she left the party hall, Lola made sure Lena was feeling better.

“Stay a little longer,” Lena said.

Lola shook her head. “I would have, for sure.” But I have to get on a bus before daybreak and head to town tomorrow. We need to get ready for the audit of the

making of our handcrafted clothes.

Lena knew what Lola had been working on lately because they shared an office, so she didn't try to stop her anymore.

Lena, on the other hand, tried to get Damien or Ryan to take her home, but Lola firmly refused. "I don't want anyone's fun to be cut in half," she said. "Don't worry, Katie, I'm a big girl, and to top it all off, I still have my secret weapon with me." Always.

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It was quiet at night, and just a few people went by every now and again. Lola whistled as she walked, with streetlights lighting her route.

She waited in front of the party hall for about twenty minutes, but when she tried to call a taxi, it didn't work. She kicked the postbox in frustration and decided to walk. Her phone's battery had died, so she couldn't use the app to call a taxi. She felt like kicking herself because she had forgotten to bring the charger. If she went back into the party to use someone else's phone, those loofas inside would surely drop her home forcefully this time and close the party. That was not acceptable. Walking until she saw a taxi seemed like a better idea.

At this time of day, only a few buses were running. If she walked long enough, she could even get to one of the nearest bus stops in this god-forsaken rich area. Rich people in the suburbs didn't use buses.

Lola made a point to herself not to have her own child's party at places like these that are rich.

“Hey, Macy.”

When she was walking by a dark back alley of what appeared like an old, empty building, a harsh voice behind her made her jump. Her happy whistling was cut short and fell into nothingness.

She turned around quickly and raised an eyebrow when she saw a young man, probably in his mid-twenties, with a rough appearance and tattoos all over except for the middle of his face. He was walking in a way that made him look intoxicated or

drugged up, and he had a sleepy grin on his face.

Damn!

She turned around quickly and started walking quickly.

“Are you deaf? Macy? “

What was up with his “a” accent? Lola would have asked the guy if the circumstance wasn’t a little terrifying.

The guy suddenly raced past Lola and stood in front of her, blocking her passage. “Ya ya ya—Macy, wait for a minute, I say.”

She turned around and walked to the right, and he did likewise. When she tried to move to the left, he did, too, and stood in her way.

Lola screamed, but the addicted guy was puzzled for a second since it was a scream of anger, not fear.

“Get out of my way, idiot,” Lola said.

A second went by.

He didn’t move; he only smiled. “Listen, Macy,” he said slowly. “Listen very carefully—”

“Why would I?” Just get out of the path, moron. “Who stops a lady in such a way—

“Shut up!” Just shut the f*ck up! “Getting angry, he cut her off. “Now be a nice girl, Macy, which you clearly aren’t, and give me that bag of yours. Make sure it has your

phone and cash in it.”

Well, here was what she had been dreading from the start. “I don’t have any cash with me,” she answered simply, which was a lie. She opened her lips to say she had misplaced her phone at the party she went to, but the guy beat her in her deception.

“That’s for me to figure out now—give me your purse that looks like it’s about to burst.”

And the purse did have a big belly because it was full of things that would save her life, like band-aids, antiseptic cream, pain meds, a sanitary napkin, sanitizer spray, wipes, chapstick, a comb, a lighter, a roll-on for mosquitoes, a notepad, a pen, a mini torchlight, some nuts, a banana, and so on. And, of course, there was her phone and a small wallet with some cash and a credit card. She couldn’t lose all of these!

There is no way somebody could take anything from Lola.

So she calmed her face and got ready.

The man seemed a little bewildered as he said, “What are you thinking about, Macy?” “Hurry up!” I have plans with my buddies.

Lola stepped back and then kicked the air between them. “Aiyaaa...”

The guy was so astonished that he took a few steps back. “What the hell!” “

Lola stopped to get her breath after all the quick motions. She hoped the guy got the hint. She wasn’t a weak girl, and if he believed she was, he was going to get injured from then on.

But her hopes were dashed when the guy abruptly sprang forward after a second

lengthy blank glance, grabbed her by the arms, and pushed her against the wall behind her.

Lola screamed and struggled to get away, but the man held her tighter.

“Stop moving ya!” He pushed her hard against the wall and slipped one hand down to seize her pocketbook.

But she fought back hard and fiercely. “Let me go, you jerk!” “

Lola saw him pull out a knife from his pocket, and it was harder and harder for the guy to keep her down.

Her heart raced.

He put the knife to her throat and gave her a frightening expression. Then he started to drop his other hand to get her pocketbook, but then he noticed the rise of her bosom, and his gaze changed. His unclean, white tongue came out of his lips to lick his bottom lip.

“Well, well,” he said. “You seem like a work of art, Macy.” She tried to fight back, but he slipped his fingers down her exposed neck to grip her chest.

“You’re a f*****g a*shole!” “She yelled and pushed him away with all her might.

He stumbled back a few inches, and the blade barely scraped her neck. A line of brilliant crimson slowly appeared on her pale skin.

She took advantage of the chance she had when he was getting his legs back in balance for a few seconds.

As she screamed a battle cry, she reached inside the neckline of her dress and pulled out her dagger. Just as she was about to raise the knife up threateningly, the man hurled himself on top of her.

The sound of human flesh cutting through the air was really loud.

Lola gasped and glanced down.

The man also looked down, and his gasp was louder.

She shivered.

Damn!

She had stabbed him in the p***s.

The guy glanced up and stood there, staring at her in shock for a second before his face contorted. “F*****g hell!” he yelled in anguish. Aaaa... You bitcha. “You crazy bitch.”

“You did it yourself, jerk. Oh my God!” “She made a frown as she saw blood start to stain the front of his soiled jeans. “F**k, F**k, F**k.” “F**k, Hell.”

“I’ll kill you!” “He yelled.

The hurt guy, who was blind with wrath and anguish, raised his fist and flung it at her face, once and then again. Luckily, she ducked each time. It was almost funny until she lost her rhythm.

When his knuckles hit her jaw, the pain that went across the side of her face made her vision become fuzzy.

She wondered whether she was losing this fight, even if her knife had finally drawn blood.

But she heard a man's voice calling her name through the fog.

“Lola!”

The man's weight suddenly left her. She fell to the floor, hardly awake.

A shadow hovered over her. Her blurry eyes saw the face as a flat surface with no eyes, nose, or mouth. It looked rather hilarious. Lola laughed a little bit, but she was still confused.

“Ouch,” Lola muttered as she moved on the bed in the hospital's emergency room. “Please be a little more gentle.”

Ryan moved the ice pack he was pressing against her eye. “Hold still,” he shouted angrily. “The nurse said that an ice pack would help the bruise go down quickly.”

There was a bandage over the now-clean sliver of a cut on her neck. The cut still hurt a bit.

“She didn't tell you to hit me again with the ice pack.”

“If you're that worried about getting bruises, you shouldn't have tried to walk home alone so late at night—”

“Blame it on that fancy neighborhood—there weren't any taxis on the road,” she said.

“That guy could have really hurt you!” He was angry.

“That guy got hurt worse, right in the middle.” He took off the ice pack when he saw her move up straight. “Oh, my knife!” Where is it? What if I go to the station and question them about the knife? “

Ryan grumbled. “I would strongly suggest against it,” he replied, glaring at Lola. “With great care and attention, I made them understand that you acted in self-defense.” “I think the knife is at the station with them.” When Lola opened her mouth to say something, he quickly stopped her by saying, “No way!” They could think it’s strange that you’re asking for it. “Don’t put your hand any deeper into a crocodile’s mouth.”

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Lola gazed at him for a moment before letting out a big sigh and lowering her head. When she started talking, it looked like she was going back in time. “It was my lucky thing, you know—the knife. I still remember when I saw it at a summer fair in a gypsy store. They had all these interesting things, but that knife caught my eye.”

Ryan said, “A knife of all things.”

Lola shrugged her shoulders. “So, I bought it and took it to the church near me so Father Patrick could bless it.”

“And then the story gets religious.”

“It had been with me for so long,” she said with a sigh. “I can’t believe it’s gone.”

“Did you know that you’re a very interesting person?”

“Huh?” It was as if she had just come back to the present after a lengthy trek into the past. “What did you say?”

Ryan responded, “I said you’re weird,” with a blank look on his face.

He was tugging her leg again. She hit him in the upper arm and damaged her own knuckles. Once more. Well, this wasn’t the first time she had hit him there just to hurt herself and be astonished by that brick arm.

The arrogant smirk on his face made her feel even worse about losing her knife.

Beach at Sea Town.

That's where Lola wanted to have her birthday party this year. It was a gorgeous beach that wasn't as congested as Velden's. It was two hours distant. There were kilometers of sand that met the water, and the black stones were a wonderful addition.

She found this spot by chance a few years ago. It was on the road to Damien's mother's and sister's house in his hometown. He had also set up a modest clothing factory in his hometown.

Lola looked at her companions and said, "I found this little piece of heaven from the car while we were driving to his town." "I told him to stop the car right away so I could see it. I fell in love with this place right away."

Ryan remarked, "Did you two used to travel a lot together?" There was an edge to his voice. Lola didn't know whether anyone else saw that.

"I've been in this business with him since he started. We're also good friends, even though he's a bit of a jerk sometimes. So, yes, we've had to travel a lot together," she said, shrugging her shoulders. "And we'll have to do it again in the future."

Ryan suddenly went into a profound state of contemplation for some reason.

Strange.

Damien was softly putting the chunks of firewood in front of them. The sun will shortly start its glorious descent down into the sea. After that, it would be a bit cooler, which is not what it is today. They would need a beautiful fire to make the night brighter, warmer, and happier. And for that, they had carried the wood for the fire in

the trunk of Ryan's car.

Lena shook Dave in her lap while moving her folded legs on the carpet. The tiny child was slowly waking up. "I remember when these two first brought me here," she said, pointing to Damien and Lola. Damien had both of my eyes covered with his hands while Lola held my shoulders. I could tell it was a beach because I could hear the waves crashing. But I didn't expect how beautiful it was.

Ashley was drinking some water. She started to cough and sputter all of a sudden.

Damien and Ryan were hitting Lola's back hard before she could get to her.

Ashley was shocked by the abrupt onslaught that was meant to aid her as the poor girl attempted to catch her breath.

Lola stared at the two men, going back and forth between them. She said, "Are you two crazy?" "At this rate, you're going to kill the girl! For Heaven's sake, stop!"

Both men turned to look at Lola with a look of disbelief. Thank goodness they had both stopped doing their comprehensive first-aid work.

Ryan responded, "Putting pressure on her back should help her—"

Damien quickly added, "I agree."

"Yeah. See?" Ryan nodded.

Lola tsked. "She can cough, which means it was only a partial blockage. Coughing and deep breathing help her clear her windpipe."

"Just let her relax, okay?" Lena said. "There's no need to freak out so much."

Ashley was still coughing. “I’m... alright. Don’t... worry...” she replied between coughing.

Damien walked back after looking at her for a long time.

But Ryan stayed on his knees next to her. “Do you need some water?”

Ashley shook her head to say no.

Damien’s gaze abruptly narrowed. “Are you going to drown her with more water?” He frowned and directed his finger at Ryan, who still had his hand loosely on Ashley’s waist. “She’s hurt there, right under your hand. I suggest you take it off right away. Come on, take it off.”

Ryan was surprised by how Damien acted, but he did what he was ordered to do. “How did she get hurt?” he questioned Damien. Ashley was gathering her breath, but her coughing spell had ceased by now. It did correct itself, though.

“She said she fell down the stairs,” Damien said.

“According to her! Where were you?” Ryan inquired again.

Lena, Lola, and Dave, who was now fully awake, glanced back and forth between the two. Dave’s lips were twitching in subtle ways. His face showed that he was about to weep.

“I don’t follow her around all day, Ryan. We both work in different places,” Damien said, dragging his palm over his face. “And it happened before our—”

“Your?” Ryan pushed.

Lola now felt that Ryan had started his legendary game of teasing. And Damien was going along with it so readily.

That's crazy!

"Ryan!" Lena sought to scold her childhood buddy in a quiet way.

"You know it very well!" Damien was really angry with Ryan now, with his fists on his hips.

Ashley, who is now well, was nevertheless shocked by what was said.

Ryan didn't look like he wanted to quit. "But—"

"That's enough!" Lola yelled like a grizzly. "Ryan, you need to stop asking questions now."

Ryan let out a deep sigh in a dramatic way. "My queen, anything you want."

The way he said "my queen" was so unique and special.

Was that part of his teasing?

Ryan got up from Ashley and went back to sit where he had been before.

Dave started to sniff and snuffle all of a sudden, and then he started to cry, which made everyone look at him. There were sounds of damp squelching and a couple of bangs.

Lena laughed uncomfortably. "Damien, can you please give me your car keys? It looks like baby Dave has pooped, and I need to change his diaper."

“Sure. In fact, let’s go together,” Damien answered with a sigh. Ryan’s signs of displeasure and their short conversation went away quickly. “Allow me to assist you.”

Lena turned down his help a few times, stating she didn’t want to ruin the enjoyment for everyone else and that she would be back soon. Most of the time, though, Damien could be quite convincing. In the end, they all departed together for the car and told everyone they would be back soon after cleaning up and feeding the young kid.

“Are you okay now, Ashley?” Lola inquired with worry. She was sad to see Ashley looking at the backs of the two who were leaving. There were so many feelings on her face that it was hard to tell where they came from or why they were there. Ashley had a complicated tempest in her eyes till she blinked and turned away.

She felt close to this girl as much as she did to Lena.

“Huh? Ah, yes, I’m fine now,” Ashley said with a smile, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

Ashley always had her camera bag right next to her. She turned toward it, unlocked the chain, and took out her DSLR.

Ryan whistled in amazement. “It’s cool to see women handle tools, gadgets, and gears so well,” he said as he watched Ashley neatly connect the huge lens to it.

Ashley smiled but didn’t glance up from what she was doing.

Lola said, “That camera looks like a shotgun now. Good job, girl.” “Are you going to start taking pictures?”

Ashley nodded. “I think I can get a few good clicks closer to the sea,” she said, pointing to the distance. “Thanks for inviting me to this beautiful beach, Lola. It’s

quiet, empty, and peaceful.”

Lola waved her hand and replied, “Eh. No need to thank you and all that. You’re in this circle now.”

A few minutes later, Ryan and Lola were the only ones left on the mat, with their legs stretched out in front of them on the sand. From a distance, Ashley’s body seemed petite. As she gazed through the lens of her camera, the waves crept up to her feet from behind her.

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Ryan said with a serious face, “You see, Lola.” “Those two are having problems with everything.”

Lola drank apple juice from a plastic glass that could only be used once. “You mean the half-namesakes.”

Ryan’s lips curled into a smile on one side. But his expression still seemed serious. “Yes,” he said. “Damien and Ashley are who I’m talking about. Just hearing their names together sounds so strange. Also, they’re definitely hiding something. After that scandal spread everywhere, something terrible must have happened for them to make this big decision—this big step.”

Selene sighed and looked at the woman with the camera, who was slowly traveling down the line where the sea met the land. She seemed quite forlorn. “Sometimes what seems wrong actually pushes us toward what is right for us. The pain we feel where we are now makes us move in the right direction.”

Ryan said cynically, “And all of a sudden, you’re a yogi.”

Lola lifted an eyebrow. “Are you studying Indian culture or language?”

Ryan’s smile got bigger. “Ashley is from India. I’m trying to figure her out and guess how she will change Damien’s life.”

Lola nodded. “I heard that her father came to the US from Goa. She loves to travel and goes on these yearly tours—”

“Argh. I know all of these,” Ryan said angrily. “And I know you’ve become a fan of her.”

“Who wouldn’t?” Lola looked like she was in a dream. “She looks like she has wings on her back.”

“Speaking of wings,” Ryan suddenly sat up straight and started to unlock the chain on the rucksack he had taken with him. “I have something for you.”

She frowned as she saw him pull out a large wooden box that was the size of his hand. “What’s that? Is there something inside?”

“Yes, your gift is inside.”

Her eyebrows went up. He knew she would give him things, so it wasn’t a surprise. Damien, Ashley, and Lena had already given her the gifts right after they laid out the mat and sat down comfortably. Damien got her a beautiful watch with butterfly motifs on it. Lena also gave her a tiny folding mirror with butterfly designs on it, which was a nice surprise.

Lola had said, “Your choices freaking again have some similarities,” while holding her face. “As usual.”

Ashley had appeared a little upset for some reason. Damien would have been overjoyed to hear such things about Lola. But strangely, he stayed quiet, too.

Ashley had given Lola a beautiful antique pattern scarf. It was virtually the same as Ashley’s scarf when they shot their first TV ad for their firm a few days ago. Ashley recalled it because Lola had said how beautiful it was.

Lola was a little surprised as to why Ryan didn’t give her his present along with the

others.

He now had the package ready for her to grab. "I can say for sure that you will like it."

"Why are you so sure?" Lola said as she accepted the package. "You look like you're up to something."

"You'll see."

She opened the metal clasp and raised the lid. She gasped when she saw what was inside. "A knife!"

It was a little, charming pocket knife with strange markings on its body that made it appear harmless. She stared at Ryan with her mouth open.

"Time will tell if it works out for you," he remarked. "But that's only if you agree to keep it with you."

There is a belief in many cultures throughout the world that giving someone a knife as a gift would end or cut off a relationship. But to Lola, it felt like she had gotten her wings back. She always felt safe when she had a weapon like this with her. And to be honest, she had felt a little embarrassed after losing her knife that night.

Her eyes sparkled.

She instantly felt a rush of exhilaration. She screamed and ran forward, wrapping her arms around Ryan. He was completely unprepared and gasped. "Thank you, Ryan." She was so delighted that her body shook. "I already feel lucky."

Ryan cautiously raised a hand and put it on her back, patting her to make her feel

better. Lola heard him laugh and felt the vibration impact her in more than one spot because their bodies were touching due to the hug.

She saw Damien pass by them and toward the only woman who was still keeping the wonders of the great sea and the sky to herself. The man didn't even see Lola and Ryan.

The sun started to descend, although it would see numerous high points before nightfall.

Lola pulled away from Ryan and shyly tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. The light from the setting sun bounced off the sharp, metal surface of the switchblade as she opened it. Her eyes sparkled.

“Right before you go out on a killing spree, you look like a total madwoman, Lola.”

“Shut up, Ryan!” Lola hit him on the arm. But it was like a tree stump she had seen before. She twisted her face as agony surged through her knuckles.

Ryan laughed and threw his head back.

The sound is carried away by the salty sea breeze, but the echoes stay with Lola. She stared at him without blinking, holding the knife.

There were a lot of bad men on Earth. Damien was not one of those people. In fact, he was far from that. He was a little dumb, but he had a good heart.

Lola had known Damien for a long time, and he had always been there to aid anybody who needed it. He was always a source of hope and advice for her in

practically all of her problems. He had stopped Lena from dying and being sad.

Damien cared for his friends and really cared about them, going beyond the usual limits of friendship.

That's why Lola couldn't stand seeing Damien so sad.

He hadn't come to the office in two days, and he told everyone in the chat part of their company's website that he was going to work from home.

Work from home? No way!

Ashley sent Damien a divorce notice to his office address, and Lena was present when it happened. After returning from Lena's doctor's appointment, they went right back to the workplace to finish the rest of their workdays. The sky had once more begun to pour fire on poor Lena bird. It was tearing Lola's heart, but she tried not to show it too much so Lena wouldn't become scared, and so she would stay focused.

Lola was occupied with a rude old lady who wanted to talk to someone higher up, which was her, and said that all the short skirts were too long for her.

By the way, the lady was looking at a size area that was completely inappropriate for her. It took Lola a long time and a lot of fake lovely words to get the lady to the right spot.

Some folks were just too obstinate.

Lola only noticed Damien as he ran out of the store like his tail was on fire.

Lola yelled, "Dami, boy!" and hit the locked door. "Open the door right now, or I'm going to kick it down."

She thought she heard someone laugh at her from within. He believed she wouldn't be able to go through the door, right? Damn it, he was correct!

“Stop acting like a child and open the door right now!” she shouted again. And she knew he was paying attention but not saying anything. He could have thought that if he didn't say anything, she would leave him alone. She would, like hell! If Damien believed this, he still didn't know what kind of person she was.

He had only chatted to her a few minutes before and was merely replying “hmm” to whatever she said or requested. Lola decided that he needed a personal punch in the face to wake him up and get him to do something about the problem.

When she was really angry, she moved back from the door and kicked it hard, but she damaged her own foot instead.

Damn.

She rubbed her chin like a real crime leader and thought about what to do. At this rate, her buddy and his wife, who had also become her friend, would be divorced even though they loved one another. This door was in her path. She couldn't shatter it herself, though. She needed someone else's body to do it.

Ryan.

She thought about Ryan. But she remembered that he was heading back to South Hills today. He probably left for the trip by the time he promised her he would last night. Lola felt the guy was strange. He contacted her last night and said he had a nasty dream about her. That's why he was checking to see if she was okay. The night before that, he contacted her because he was sneezing a lot after sighting a knife while jogging that night. He got the knife because he believed the one he gave her on her birthday was lonely and maybe its soul was reaching out for a buddy.

Lola was so scared that she ran to wash her knife with turmeric and salt water right away. She even put it in water for a long period to see if it was breathing. What if Ryan had given her a real voodoo knife?

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She picked up her phone and called Ryan. He picked up in the first two seconds, which was a surprise. Was he sitting there with his nose in the phone?

Ryan's voice came through the phone and said, "So, you remember me now?" He sounded a little... on the brink. He merely wanted to start a brawl.

She questioned him instead, "Where are you right now?" because there were more important things going on.

"Almost there, Ryan said, "to the highway that goes outside of Velden." "Why? Do you want me to turn around and tell you something before I go?"

Lola raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything. "I'm actually outside Damien's door, and he's answering. Ashley sent him divorce papers and left the country without saying anything. So..."

Ryan seemed worried when he said, "Do you think he might be in the middle of killing himself or something like that?"

Lola thought her nose was becoming longer. But she wasn't really lying. In a nutshell, she was just letting someone guess what they wanted.

She said, "Please don't call the police or ambulance until we've checked," just to be safe.

"Don't worry. I'm already halfway there as I'm speaking to you." Ryan remarked, as the sound of his automobile engine accelerating up echoed through the phone. "That

freaking Romeo! I'll be there as soon as I can, babe. Don't worry too much." He hung up.

She looked at the phone for a long time after taking it away from her ear.

Did Ryan call her babe? What the—

The door of Damien's flat suddenly burst open.

Lola wasn't ready for this, so she startled and spun around, almost dropping her phone.

"I can't believe you're lying about me right in front of me!"

Ah! Dami boy has finally come into the world.

Later, Lola, Ryan, and Damien were all in Damien's living room.

Damien sat there with a blank look on his face, staring at a pair of women's slippers near the front entrance. It was easy to figure out who they belonged to. It was evident how shattered the person was from the bags under his eyes, the dry, cracked lips, the crumpled clothing, and the sad droop that covered his whole body. Lola had never seen him like this before, even when he had an infatuation on Lena that didn't work out.

Ryan sat next to Lola and remarked, "He looks sad, but not like he's going to do what you said he was going to do."

Lola didn't say anything in response. Instead, she paid attention to Damien. "Do you know where Ashley went?"

Damien's face stayed the same. "Yes, China. I phoned Rollan, Ashley's supervisor. He mostly plans her yearly travels. I asked him to tell me where she is. She simply left a message saying goodbye and called me right before the plane she was on took off. He stopped in the middle of the sentence, as if he was struggling to hold back his tears.

Lola lifted her eyebrows. "Then why are you still here, my friend? I know you're hurt, but you should be on the first flight to where she is—"

"Do you really think I didn't?" he said with a laugh. "Right after I got the papers, rushed home, and got the note, I was on my way to the airport, but—"

"But?"

"But?"

Ryan and Lola both stated the same thing.

"I went over the speed limit, got chased by the police, hit a lamppost, got a ticket, and my license was suspended for fifteen days," he said with a sigh and put his head in his hands.

"Whoa," Ryan said, looking pleased.

Lola was also surprised. "That just made me think of a scene from a climactic movie."

Damien's voice trembled at the end as he said, "But it was all for nothing because I should have known that her flight had already taken off."

Lola took out her phone and started typing. "No worries, man," she said. "We only

need you to get on the next available flight.”

“For what!” Damien ran his fingers through his hair, shivering with wrath and disgust. “The divorce papers she gave me already have her signature on them. The more I look at them, the more I see that she wants to end our marriage and get rid of me. She doesn’t love me the way I love her.”

“I agree,” Ryan said.

“Shut up, both of you!” Lola yelled at them, staring at them back and forth. When Ryan put his hands up in surrender, she looked at Damien again. “And you, how do you know Ashley doesn’t feel the same way? Did she tell you herself?” She kept scrolling and typing on her phone the whole time.

“Her behavior says enough—

“Maybe not,” Lola answered, looking sternly at Damien. “You have to go and talk to her yourself to find out.”

Damien didn’t fight with her this time for whatever reason. He merely looked at her.

Okay.

The bell rang. The men only stared at the door, but Lola ran to open it.

Jude came in with a luggage. “Come on, friend, let’s go catch the flight! We don’t have much time. Why are you still sitting? Have you fainted with your eyes open?” he yelled at Damien, forgetting that they were both professionals. After that, he turned to Lola in the same hyperactive way. “Can you help me pick him up and get him on the plane? It’ll be hard for me because he’s taller than me.”

Damien angrily said, “Lola? What’s Jude doing here?” before Lola could say anything.

“Dami boy,” Lola said with a lot of force. “I had both of your tickets confirmed before I got here. I was just texting Jude to tell him to hurry.”

“Well,” Ryan said, clapping his fists. “You’re the best at planning lovers’ reunions, Lola!”

Lola raised a hand to tell Damien to stop when she saw him open his mouth to say something that might be useless and waste more time. “You’ve been acting like a child by not picking up calls, going to the office, or even eating properly the past few days. So, I’m not to blame for making Jude go with you.”

“I’m going to take good care of him, Lola,” Jude said as he stood up straight. “You don’t have to worry at all.”

Ryan grabbed up his phone and informed Lola, “I guess I need to call a taxi now,” while Damien was clearly attempting to understand what was going on and was starting to feel better since he was going to chase his wife.

Lola shook her head. “A taxi driver won’t understand how serious the situation is and will make sure we get them to the airport in the next thirty minutes.”

Damien abruptly sprung up as if someone had poked him in the b**t. “It will only take me two minutes to pack and get my passport.” Then he went into his bedroom.

Ryan remarked, “So, how do you think he would get to the airport now? Have you forgotten that he doesn’t have a license for the next fifteen days? And you and Jude can’t drive—”

“But you can,” Lola answered with a smile.

Ryan was quiet for a while, moving about on the couch and looking up at Lola. He thought about it until it finally hit him. “No. No way!”

Jude was a quiet listener, gazing back and forth and reacting to what they said.

“Why not? You can drive, you have a car, and you know how bad things are—”

Ryan stood up and walked closer to Lola. “I’m going back to Velden today,” he said.

Lola put her fists on her hips and lifted her chin. “Well, forget that. One of your friends needs you here.”

Ryan was immediately looking into her eyes, and it looked like he was hiding a smile. “Say please, then.”

“Huh,” she said, astonished.

He said again, “You have to say please if you want me to drive.”

“I wouldn’t say please to my shadow. Why do you think I would say please to you?”

He couldn’t help but smile. “Someday you will, if not today.”

Lola pinched her brows in confusion.

Strange man!

At that time, Damien stepped out of the room carrying a duffel bag. Then, in a hurry, all four of them got into Ryan’s car and drove to the airport, blasting a song from Fast

and Furious.

One of the roads had a lot of cars on it. Lola rolled down the window on the passenger side and yelled, “Get out of the way, you motherf***er! Were you a sloth in your past life, lazy hag? Move out of the way, or I’m going to shove my knife up your...”

All three males in the automobile shivered at the same time.

Jude murmured from the backseat, “I feel blood coming out of my ears.” Damien stayed quiet, but he looked very impatient next to him.

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They got to the airport with only five minutes to spare before the jet took off.

“Take care of Dami boy and girl, Jude,” Lola screamed as Jude and Damien were the last ones to go through the gates, which only people with tickets could follow. “Good luck, Dami boy. Bring your girl back home soon!”

Ryan said, “Everyone is looking at you, Lola.” “Do you really need to yell this much?”

When Lola turned around, she gave Ryan a blank look before leaping forward to hug him without thinking.

Ryan was so surprised that he gasped. He mumbled, “Well, that’s unexpected,” as if he were talking to himself.

Lola felt his hands gently move around her. “Hey... you okay?” he inquired with a smile.

She moaned and put her head on his chest. “I just want my friends to be happy,” she remarked. “Damien’s love life is so hard right now, and Lena’s pain is coming back. I know I seem like a stubborn b*itch, Ryan, but I can’t stand to see them in pain.”

Lola’s eyes closed as he gently brushed his palm over the back of her head.

Ryan responded, “It will be okay, babe,” and she didn’t pay attention to what he called her. “Let’s trust fate and do our best to find answers.”

Oh my, her liver just moved as she was listening to him. She also got a little wet, which is bad.

“But you’re absolutely right that you’re a stubborn thing that you just said.”

She opened her eyes wide and stopped moving, her face still crushed against his chest.

Ryan went on, “I actually went to a strange festival in a village where they let their cows drink alcohol and then let them run free. You sound and look like one of those cows sometimes, throwing up on people and hitting them over and over again.”

Lola looked up at him with a glare.

“See,” he laughed. “That’s what I’m talking about.”

“I’ll show you a cow, alright,” she said, stepping back and raising her hand to hit him in the face.

But Ryan stopped that punch by holding her wrist and pulling her back into his arms with his other hand. Lola was ready for anything to happen next.

He kissed her lips lightly as he lowered his head. It was a brief moment that left her speechless.

Lola stared at Ryan with wide eyes as he seemed bewildered. And all of a sudden, everything he had been doing that was strange made sense.

Lola went to the electronics store that practically everyone told her to go to for the

first time and was shocked by how big it was.

“Whah—” she said, looking around with wide eyes and gripping the edge of her long white blouse.

She could swear that it didn’t appear so enormous from the outside. This made her think of the magic tent from one of the Harry Potter movies.

She was already clear what she wanted to get, but she couldn’t help but get sidetracked by all the electronics in her way, including a phone, a mousepad, a keyboard cleaning brush, LED lights, an LED mirror, a steam cleaner, an electric shaver, and so on.

Women spend a lot of time wandering around stores and malls, but they never buy anything they see. It is more fun to look at thousands of things that you might want to buy in the future.

After almost an hour, she finally got to the spy cameras she had planned to acquire before coming here. She was glad to find that there were a lot of different kinds of goods, such pens, wristwatches, sunglasses, vanity bags, and so on. She began to search for anything that may have a small, hidden camera in it.

“Wow, what a surprise, terminator!” a voice she knew said behind her.

Lola glanced around and saw the same smile and two naughty eyes.

Ryan was the one.

Damn it.

Since the airport incident, she had been staying away from Ryan like the plague. She

couldn't stop thinking about the kiss he had so gently put on her lips. The overall significance of all the things he did before that would frequently make her pulse beat.

Lola has been out with other people previously. They were all informal, like planning day trips, meals, and movie evenings after getting to know one other, like performing an extracurricular activity or interest. But she never felt like she was in a state of euphoria like this.

She didn't know what to do with it.

Ryan made her blush as much as he made her upset lately. He was like both her drug and her poison.

"What are you doing here?" she questioned, sounding a little annoyed.

He playfully remarked, "The same thing you're," and then he stooped down to look at the objects in front of her and read what was written on the part. He lifted an eyebrow in surprise and whistled softly. He rubbed the back of his head and said, "From sharp knives to spy cameras in random things." "You're doing really well, Lola. Who are you going after, honey?"

"It's just to keep proof of any illegal activities in the store while Damien is away. And I'm not your honey," Lola spat, even though her cheeks were already starting to turn crimson, showing how much his sweet words had impacted her.

She was becoming a loser!

"Really?" He looked like he didn't believe it.

Well, she didn't care. She had a bloody job to do.

She went back to looking at the items to choose the ones that would work best for her.

Minty air started to blow on her shoulder in a steady pattern, making her freeze.

Newness.

Surprise.

She turned her head to see that it was Ryan. Again, bloody! He was virtually breathing on her neck as his eyes were fixed on the spying objects she was looking at. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

She could even see the small blackhead on his nose since he was so near.

He didn’t look at her when he said, “I run a security company.” “So, I’m thinking about getting some of this for myself—”

“Bullshit,” she said angrily. “You can do it from a respectable distance from me—”

“Are you talking about that same respectable distance we had at the airport?”

Damn! Why did he have to bring it up now?

At first, she was shocked because her wrath faded and was replaced with humiliation and a lot of other things. Because she remembered and was standing directly in front of the man from that not-so-distant recollection.

In just a few seconds, her cheeks turned red.

And in this short time, he had gotten even closer, almost close enough to breathe.

She couldn't move and was locked staring at his eyes, which sparkled with something gentle, harsh, or desperate.

The ringing of a phone was the last thing that saved them.

She looked at the phone and saw it was him.

"Who's Zen?" Ryan was peeking over her shoulder from the rear.

Lola made a clucking sound with her tongue because she was angry. "Just a friend," she said, as any other answer would have made things too complex.

"I know almost all of your friends in Velden—"

"But she said, 'Well, nearly. But you surely don't know all of them.'"

She excused herself from him and moved to a few racks away to take the call. "Ah, I had a very sweet feeling that you would call."

"Is that so?" Zen's joyful voice came through on the other end. He giggled in a sweet way. "And I have a feeling that we're going to have a great time tonight. I hope you haven't forgotten about our date?"

"Did you think I wouldn't come, Zenieeee?" Lola replied in a baby voice, pouting.

"Of course not!" Zen responded quickly, "Of course not."

Lola rolled her eyes and made a frown, but she chatted nicely for another minute before hanging up. Ryan was no longer at the rack of spying goods when she got back.

Thanks. She thought. She was a little sad that he didn't even say goodbye before he left. But she wasn't really nice to him either. Ryan had to reschedule his trip back to South Hills since she kept trying to aid Damien. She felt a little bad about it now that she thought about it.

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But she didn't get why he was remained at Velden. Damien departed to make up with Ashley three days later. Ryan may have gone back this time.

The best option seems to be a bracelet with a tiny video camera hidden between the gray beads. She also had a dress that was the same color. But it cost a much.

Lola took the money out of her wallet, and for a brief while, her heart and fingers felt heavy. A emotion that comes up when you spend too much money you worked hard for.

Lola sat across from Zen in a fancy Italian restaurant at night. She was wearing a gray crewneck dress that went to her knees and had a side split. The light from the chandelier above her bracelet made it shine. She put her thin finger on it to move the camera closer to Zen so that it could record everything he said and did exactly.

They had previously written down a bunch of his sweet phrases. He appeared like a charming gentleman next door in his beige sweater and brown coat. And his smile appeared too real. Lola, on the other hand, already knew who the real man was.

Zen exclaimed, "Your beauty is completely out of this world tonight," as the server cleaned up their table. "I heard they have a great room upstairs that faces east and has great views of the river. Do you want to watch the sunrise together?"

Oh! But she had done what she set out to do. Lola grinned and played with her phone under the table. She was meant to say something to Zen that would make him wait a few more minutes for her to get there. But as a familiar baritone cleared his throat, she looked to the right. And her eyes got bigger, and her grin faded.

Ryan!

Damn. What was he doing here?

He created a face that seemed very artificial when he was surprised.

Ryan pushed back his chair and stood up. “Oh, wow, Lola,” he exclaimed. “Didn’t expect to see you here!” He had on his usual suit coat. He was dressed entirely in black today.

“So didn’t I,” she responded with a phony smile and firmly gritted teeth.

Zen was looking back and forth at them with interest.

Ryan then walked over to Lola’s chair and put a hand on the backrest, exactly near to her shoulder. He looked Zen in the eye. The conduct seemed to be quite territorial.

Ryan inquired, “Is this your friend Lola?”

Damn.

“Well,” Lola swallowed and paused. “Um, well, you see—”

Zen smiled as she started to stutter and grabbed for her hand. “Oh, my Lola is so shy. Yes, Mr. We’re dating.”

Ryan, on the other hand, didn’t appear to want to introduce himself at all. His face got darker. “Since when?” he asked instead.

Zen raised his eyebrows, much like Lola did.

Maybe he was jealous? That thought entered her mind.

But just now, he was undermining her objective.

“Ryan!” She snarled and tried to hide it from Zen.

Ryan didn’t pay attention to that. His steely eyes were on the man in front of him.

“Did you come here to eat by yourself, Ryan?” Lola questioned Ryan instead, seeking to change the subject.

“Yes,” Ryan said, his face still grim. “I don’t date in secret, you see.”

What the heck was wrong with him?

Zen said, “You can join us if you want,” seeming a little uncomfortable.

Ryan pulled a chair back and sat down at their table. It was hard to believe.

Zen seemed quite surprised, and Lola stared.

Still, one wonderful thing she was starting to understand was that Ryan had come as a blessing that would put Zen’s plans on hold until she gave him what he deserved.

Ryan said, “Thanks for your offer. By the way, what’s your name?” “he asked Zen.

Zen was starting to look a little unhappy. The poor guy wanted a night of s*x. He still said, “Zen Terra—”

Ryan didn’t even let him complete his answer, as if he didn’t care for his name. “So, how well do you know Lola?” “

Zen let out a huff of a laugh that was both funny and angry. “Isn’t that a little too personal?” “

“Do you know about the knife that she always has with her?” “Ryan asked instead.

“Knife?” “Zen’s face showed shock.

“She stabs people when—”

“Ryan,” Lola said.

But the guy seemed possessed today. “I hope you have the guts to keep dating her because a mad Lola wouldn’t think twice about stabbing you.”

Zen seemed a little uncomfortable, but he smiled back at Lola and reached for her hand on the table. “Well, I don’t think that would be the case, because I’m looking forward to loving her enough that she won’t want to stab me.”

“Oh...” Lola pretended to swoon and turn to mush at every word he spoke. Thank God the camera was still recording. The live feed has been going to the right place for a while now.

Ryan’s hand suddenly slipped between Zen’s and hers. He grasped her wrist and pulled it in front of his face, breaking it free from Fran’s grip. “Let me see this bracelet?” Ryan furrowed her brows. “It looks like something I’ve seen before.” Isn’t it from the spying products area of the electronics shop this morning? “

All of a sudden, Zen appeared awake. His back straightened.

Lola got scared.

“Let go, Ryan, you stupid jackass,” Lola said as she pulled her hand away from Ryan’s. “I want to stab you in the face so badly!” “

And it seemed possible that a demon had taken over him, for Ryan’s eyes sparkled. He turned to Zen and said, “See.” You see! “

Ryan was now giving Lola an annoyed look, but she didn’t sure what he wanted Zen to do.

“Terra, you jerk.”

The loud voice had all three people at the table turn their heads toward the restaurant door.

A brunette woman in her mid-twenties was storming down the steps at the restaurant’s entrance. She was stunning, and with her long strides down the stairs and straight posture (chin up, back straight, and fire in her eyes), she looked like a powerful force.

Ryan looked perplexed, Lola looked smug, and Zen’s face was pale—he looked like he was about to die.

The dark-haired woman stormed over to the table and stood directly in front of Zen.

“Y-you! Lizzy—” Zen stuttered. How—You.

Lola and Lizzy, the brunette, stared at one other for a second before Lizzy turned to Zen and slapped him across the cheek with the back of her slim hand. The slap was so hard that Zen’s face swung and he fell back into his chair.

“What the heck!” Zen was well in just two seconds. He was still sitting in the chair

when he glanced up at Lizzy and said, “What’s wrong with you?” What is this crazy thing? “

Lizzy crossed her arms over her chest and scowled at him. “So you have the nerve to talk after getting caught—”

“For what?” Zen asked, standing up. “I’m just out here having dinner with my buddies.”

Ryan lifted his eyebrows.

“Friends?” “Huh?” Lola teased. “Weren’t you on a date with me?” You were even quite happy for us to witness the morning from an upper room after a great night together, honey.

“What!” “Zen looked like he was in a trance.

Lola thought, “What great acting skills!”

He answered, “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Lola. We’re just friends.” And I would never even consider of doing anything so crazy with anybody other than my fiancée, Lizzy.

“Wrong,” Lizzy responded angrily. “From now on, it’s your ex-fiance Lizzy, you jerk.”

“Hey, Lizzy!” Sweetheart! “Zen tried to get closer to her, but Lizzy pushed him back into the chair. “Please don’t destroy our tie and doubt my love because of what other people say. “I can see it clearly now,” he said, glaring at Lola. “She must be trying to break us up.”

Lola quickly reached across the table and grabbed Zen's hair, shaking his head hard while the guy screamed in amazement. "You say it's a conspiracy?" Lizzy has watched the whole date on live stream! Surely she can understand that the stories about you cheating on her with all those women were as real as the planet itself.

Zen was able to get away from Lola with a lot of trouble. "Live feed?" "Really?" he exclaimed in disbelief, his eyes wide.

Lola raised her hand and tapped the bracelet on her wrist. "There's a camera on it," she said.

Zen remained silent for a time before saying, "You bitch!" "and then he jumped at Lola with a fist in the air.

Lola had already put her hand in the neckline of her dress. She needed her knife.

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But halfway through, Ryan grabbed Zen's collar and pulled him to a stop. Both Lizzy and Lola screamed as Ryan raised him up and then slammed him back down on the table. The delicate wood of the table shattered in half in the middle, sending splinters flying everywhere.

Lizzy and Lola both jumped back in shock.

Ouch.

That must have really hurt Zen's back.

Ryan bent over Zen's moving body with a serene smile on his face. "You shouldn't hit women," he said.

Lola felt a warm sensation in her chest. It was a mix of a shiver, a tickle, a little respect, hope, and desire, along with a lot of other feelings.

Ryan said he would drive Lola home later that night. She couldn't say no because she still felt good from earlier.

Lola told Ryan more about the Zen case on the way back.

Lizzy, a good friend of Lola's, was an heiress and a businessman who recently fell in love with the scum Zen and got engaged to him to be married next month. Lola had seen and heard Zen with other women many times. The moron was cheating on her

friend, and Lizzy was so in love that she never believed anything bad Lola or anyone else said about him. This is why Lola had to go through this operation and share the live feed of the reality of Zen with Lizzy. Now, Zen was successfully exposed.

Ryan was a quiet and attentive listener. At times, his facial expressions showed how amazed and astonished he was, which made Lola feel proud.

“So, you work as a spy on the side? “

Lola laughed at how he was joking about. “Only when I know my friends are in danger.”

Ryan tilted his head and said, “I see.” He was instantly lost in thinking. “You would be a lively wife—I must be careful.”

That made Lola bewildered, but then the bewilderment turned into a strange, innate hope. “Huh?” “

“Ice cream?” Ryan’s eyes were drawn to an ice cream shop on the side of the road. The front of the store had a happy aspect with pictures of ice cream and cartoon characters that made him want to go inside.

It was clear that he was going to stop answering her.

Five minutes later, they were eating their cone ice cream so that no melted drops would fall. Ryan picked butterscotch for himself, while Lola chose vanilla.

They were sitting on the hood of Ryan’s car, looking out into a parking area between two buildings that opened out to a beautiful, starry sky.

Lola’s wants and choices were quite simple. What was amazing was how she selected these simple things and how much she enjoyed and celebrated them.

Lola thought Ryan had a simple life. But he was really cunning; he liked to act like a riddle to those who weren't ready for it as if it were all a game to him.

Lola was done with the games.

"You were saying something in the car, Ryan," she said, bringing up the subject he had cleverly avoided.

She saw him stop for a second, and then he placed the remainder of his ice cream and the whole biscuit cone in his mouth.

Lola was shocked as his eyes became bigger and his cheeks turned crimson from the brain freeze.

"Are you crazy?" "Lola punched him right in the back, and he almost fell off the car. "Don't think this trick would make me forget, you stupid creature!" "

Ryan started to cough a lot since the ice cream appeared too thick for him to swallow.

Lola growled and quickly massaged his back.

He stopped coughing after a while and calmed down. Then he got rigid.

Lola observed that.

He turned to gaze at her carefully, his palm still on her back. He looked straight into her eyes.

Her pulse raced. Her whole body was on high alert, and her instincts screamed that something important was about to happen. Lola would usually pull out her knife when she felt this way, which is a common way to protect herself.

So, she grabbed for the neckline of her shirt with her hand.

Ryan's hand was on hers in an instant. His big hand covered hers. She shuddered when his fingers brushed the area above the neckline of her blouse, which was near her collarbone.

He moved closer to her across the smooth hood of the automobile. "You want to know what I said..." His voice was low and seductive.

She nodded her head in a way that showed she wasn't sure. Shit. What was going to happen?

"I said," he added, "You would make a lively wife, and I have to be very careful."

"Why?" She was out of breath and already knew where this was headed.

He merely stopped for a second to look for something he couldn't explain in her eyes. "Because I would be the husband of that lively wife."

She took a deep breath.

He gently touched her face with his thumb.

She swallowed the spit that had built up in her mouth.

He was quite close.

Too close.

What if he kissed her right now?

"How could you say anything like this so easily?" She said, out of breath.

He hummed like he was in a trance, and then he sighed and got a little serious. “What’s going on with Lena again has made me realize that life is too short and unpredictable not to follow your dreams,” he said, looking at her softly and tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “And you’ve been my dream, Lola, for a while now.” Your crazy, foolishness, and boldness have won me over. So, I’m officially asking you out now. “Let’s be together.”

At the conclusion, Lola was speechless. She couldn’t stand to look at him any longer, so she threw herself into his arms and covered her face in his chest.

Lena’s fight to stay alive in the past and even today helped everyone around her recognize how important it is to remain alive.

He put his arms around her right away. She could feel him sighing with relief on her cheek.

He massaged the back of her head and told her to look at him, but she shook her head and didn’t do it.

Ryan chuckled and said, “Are you shy?”

She was, though. She murmured “hmm” in a way that made her angry. Then something clicked in her mind—along with all of his beautiful words, he had said some other things too.

She looked up with a blank face and said, “Okay, I’ll go out with you.” I can’t predict if it will lead to a good relationship in the future, though.

Ryan’s face brightened up when he nodded in agreement. But then he grimaced and said, “I’m glad, but I can’t help but notice that your face doesn’t match your words.”

She said with a snarl, “That’s because you called me crazy and stupid!” “

Ryan arched an eyebrow and said, “I didn’t lie.”

So she had the nerve to punch him in the stomach, which took him by surprise. He took a deep breath and hissed, “You’re quite a force to be reckoned with—” He couldn’t finish his sentence because she grabbed his collars and pulled him in for a long kiss on the lips. His muscles relaxed, and his arms went around her thin body. Before they knew it, the kiss turned into a kiss where their tongues touched and their souls mixed.

A few minutes later, Lola put her forehead on his chin and breathed deeply. Her eyes were closed, and she felt quite out of it.

Ryan said in a low voice, “I didn’t think you would agree to keep dating me so easily, given how arrogant and fiery you are.”

Lola’s mouth turned up into a sad smile. “I’ve learned how important it is to take advantage of opportunities to bring happiness into our lives, to forgive to ease our own heavy emotions, to take a break and do what makes us happy, to enjoy a little sun, moon, and rain, and to find and hold love and friendship in its graceful form because our time on earth is limited.” “There’s no time to waste.”

Ryan and Lola both understood where she had learnt such things. Lena was back in the situation where she had to cling on to any straws and sticks she could find around her to keep from being drawn into death’s door.

Ryan sighed and pulled Lola closer to him. “I will never take this for granted,” he whispered to her. It was a voice that nestled deep in her heart.