



# White Room Virgin (Room #1)

**Author:** *Cas Roman*

**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Raised with strict beliefs, Jonah suddenly realizes that he feels attracted to his roommate.

In the quiet isolation of his parents' farm, Jonah has always felt like an outsider. Now, as he moves to Zurich to study, he's ready for a fresh start—new friends, new experiences, and maybe even his first romance. But the vibrant city brings unexpected challenges. Jonah soon finds himself caught between the strict religious values he was raised with and the undeniable pull of his own desires. At the center of his confusion is Lucien, his enigmatic roommate.

Lucien is everything Jonah isn't: confident, artistic, and unapologetically bisexual. Though Lucien swears to keep his emotional distance, old wounds are reopened when Jonah stirs feelings he thought he'd buried long ago. Haunted by his past and hesitant to let anyone close, Lucien faces a battle between love and fear, even as Jonah's presence pushes him to confront truths he's long avoided.

Will Jonah break free from the chains of his upbringing and find the love he craves?

Will Lucien be able to face his fears?

**Total Pages (Source):** 34

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Jonah

A loud bang woke me from my sleep. I sat up, my heart racing. Irritated, I looked around, but there was nothing unusual. The door was still ajar and the lamp next to my bed was still on. I had fallen asleep with a book on my chest. In a daze, I put it away and rubbed my face.

“This fucking door...” someone mumbled in the hallway.

As the light flickered on, the wooden floor creaked under stumbling footsteps.

It must be Lucien.

“He’s coming home today. Don’t let him intimidate you!” My cousin and roommate Martin had said in a singsong voice as he left the apartment.

“What do you mean?” I had called after him. “And where are you going anyway?”

“To work. I’m on watch duty at the hospital. You know—earning money and studying for my degree. Have a good night!”

I’d been living in Zurich for a week now and Martin was looking after me like a big brother. My parents would have preferred me to pursue an apprenticeship as a farmer

rather than studying science. “An apprenticeship is all you need to take over the farm. It will even save you time and money,” my father had said. After endless discussions, they finally gave their consent—on the condition that Martin would keep an eye on me. Even though I was already of legal age at the time, he had assured them that he would take good care of me and, with their financial support, set me up in a room with a bed and a bedside lamp. Apart from my clothes in the suitcase under the bed and the book I read before going to sleep, these were my only belongings in Zurich.

I should close the door. It was too late in the evening to make a good first impression. As I glanced up, the young man had already assumed a casual pose in the doorway as he examined the scant contents of my room. His wheat-blond hair was tousled as if he had just woken up. He had pushed his hair behind his ear, which might have been styled in a quiff earlier. He wore a brown V-neck shirt and black trousers covered in paint stains.

“Like in a museum...” he murmured, his demeanor tinged with awe, an unlit cigarette poised at the corner of his lips. He appeared aloof, leaning against the doorframe with his arms folded. He fixed his gaze on me with a mischievous glint in his bright green eyes.

Martin’s words came back to me, Don’t let him intimidate you , and I held his gaze.

“Ah, the cousin from French-speaking Switzerland,” he remarked nonchalantly, tapping his fingers against his pockets in search of a lighter. “Do you speak German?”

“Uh... yes. I grew up bilingual,” I replied, slightly irritated by his soft voice. “You must be Lucien.”

His expression changed, seemingly annoyed. He narrowed his eyes. “Don’t pronounce my name in French!” he growled, his voice tinged with menace. “If you

do, say it in English.”

I frowned in surprise. Martin had only referred to him as Lu. But there was a French surname next to Martin’s on the doorbell. To ease the tension, I got up and offered him my hand. “I’m Jonah. Nice to meet you.”

For a fleeting moment, he regarded me with suspicion, then tilted his head to the side, refraining from clasping my hand as his attention shifted beyond me. “Is that the Bible you’re reading?”

“Yes.” I didn’t mind if he wanted to make fun of it, but the fact that he was standing in my doorway and ignoring my outstretched hand was starting to make me uncomfortable. Just as I was about to drop my hand and look down at the floor in uncertainty, he intervened.

“Come on!” he said and staggered toward the kitchen.

“Uh, why?” I asked but followed him anyway.

“To make a toast. Why else?”

“But ... it’s Tuesday!”

He pointed to the clock above the sink, which already showed past midnight. “No, it’s Wednesday already.” He grabbed two bottles of beer out of the fridge, opened them, and put them on the table. He sluggishly plopped down on the chair, a seat I had considered mine for a week. “Come on, sit down!” He slid a bottle in my direction and raised his beer in a toast. “Welcome to your new home!”

Beside the stack of magazines on the table lay a lighter, and he lit his cigarette. Not wanting my room to smell like smoke, I glanced at my door to make sure it was

closed, then turned back to him. “I don’t drink,” I said, but I still sat across from him.

“All the more reason to start now!” He laughed, leaned back after a big gulp, and crossed one leg over the other.

Meanwhile, I sat there like a log, not knowing where to look and wishing for the first time in my life that I had more experience in making small talk. My fear of saying the wrong thing was so overwhelming that I took a sip of beer—my first ever. All my facial muscles clenched at the bitter taste. Disgusted, I placed the bottle back on the table.

Lucien reclined against the wall, nestled in his chair, savoring a long drag from his cigarette before exhaling the smoke toward the ceiling lamp. He stared at me again as if I were a lab rat and my every move was of great importance. “Martin said something about ETH?”

“Agricultural sciences,” I replied, thinking I had found the beginning of a good conversation.

“Nice,” Lucien said and glanced out of the window, appearing to be bored.

It seems he’s not interested in a discussion after all. Why? Is it because of ETH? After all, it’s considered the best university in Switzerland—if not the world. Or is it because I screwed up my face when I took my first sip? I must have done something wrong. I wonder if he had anything to say about me moving in. Maybe his friendliness is just an act? I gave myself a slight shake, barely noticeable. No, no, no! Martin warned me. Stop it!

Lucien folded his arms behind his head. “So, what’s happening on the other side of Switzerland?”

“What do you mean?”

“Party? Chicks?”

Embarrassed, I lowered my head and held the bottle in my hands, turning it around as I searched for a suitable answer. Normally, I didn't mind admitting that I had no experience in this regard. But Lucien's confident manner somehow had the opposite effect.

He leaned in, arching his eyebrows in skepticism. “Don't tell me you're a nestling!”

“A what?”

“A nestling. Someone who spends all day in front of the TV and has never had sex.”

The blood rushed to my head and I felt hot. “What? I ... no! We don't ...have that at home.”

Lucien let out a snort and hit the table with his palm. “Holy shit, you poor thing! Well, I guess it's time to change that as soon as possible!”

“I ... I mean ... I've studied a lot,” I stammered, gripping the table tightly, with my right leg nervously tapping. “I worked a lot on the farm, got involved in church and stuff. There wasn't much else to do.”

“You're kidding me, right?”

“No,” I replied and took another sip of beer out of embarrassment. I was convinced that he had already figured me out. It was as if I had a sign hanging from my neck with the truth written in big red letters: virgin . That had never been a problem for me before. It irritated me all the more at that moment that the topic made me

uncomfortable in his presence. Lucien's mere presence bothered me.

"Oh man..." He shook his head in disbelief and put out his cigarette in the empty ashtray. "Well then! Welcome not only to your new home, but also welcome to your new life!" Without another word, he snatched both bottles of beer and went into his room.

What the hell is that about? Perplexed, I remained sitting, staring at the poster of Warhol's Gun on the wall and wondering about my new roommate. Did our interaction go well? Or was it more of a disaster? Should I have apologized for mispronouncing his name?

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Jonah

Two days later, I was running along the Limmat, a river that flows across the city, and the conversation with Lucien was still buzzing around in my mind. Why exactly did he laugh at me? Is it because I have no experience with women, or because I grew up without a television?

Where I came from, it didn't matter if you were a late bloomer; the village was small, and the nearest town was far away, which meant the choices of finding a partner were limited. What's more, my parents kept telling me that this would save me a lot of problems. I was no longer sure whether they were talking about television or intercourse.

Lucien had seen through me, and it was time to make a change. Nothing better than that. I hadn't just come to Zurich hoping to have a great time at university—I wanted to meet women, enjoy life, and go out with friends. But Martin had not only warned me about Lucien, but also about the people here in general. I didn't know what he was trying to protect me from, but I couldn't wait to meet new people.

Maybe I'll meet someone I can go to Mass with on Sundays. If that someone is also a woman, then that would be perfect.

Since I'd been in Zurich, I'd kept asking myself what it felt like to kiss a woman and



wondered how I'd managed not to think about it. Sometimes I even caught myself toying with the idea of relaxing the strict basic values I had been drilled into at home. Why wait until marriage? What was wrong with looking for a girlfriend now that relatives were far away? The prospect of broadening my horizons had been one of the reasons I had escaped the constraints of home.

When Martin left our village four years ago to become a doctor, he had said goodbye forever. At the time, I could hardly believe my ears. How could he just disappear like that? Sometime later, I wished I could summon up the courage to take such a step. I had become more and more aware of how dependent I was on my parents. And that hadn't changed to this day—after all, they were paying for my studies and hoped that I would return to the farm afterward with my newfound knowledge.

With firm resolve, I cast aside the lingering thoughts. I had come a long way and studying at ETH was my ticket out into the world—and into a new life. I would make the most of this opportunity because my freedom wouldn't last as long as I studied. And the carousel of thoughts continued. Would a good job be enough to convince my parents that I wouldn't return? Or maybe a wife?

I walked under the Kornhaus Bridge and stopped. Overnight, someone had stuck several bright blue flyers on the wall. An elderly couple and two boys with skateboards stood in front of the wall, and I approached with interest to read what was written on the flyers.

“Love

Marry

Work

Produce

Children

Money

Peace

Be good

Be smart

Be successful

And ignore how it crushes you”

The thought of rebelling against my parents’ expectations suddenly warmed my heart. Oh yes, I was ready to take my life into my own hands and embark on this adventure. I felt a tingle of excitement in my body and anticipation for something I couldn’t even put my finger on. It was exactly what I wanted. I wanted love! I wanted to get married and start a family! I wanted to live a peaceful and happy life in freedom! But my parents kept me on a tight leash, and I wasn’t allowed to do what I wanted. That had to change.

I realized that the author likely intended an entirely different interpretation with those lines, eluding my understanding. Nonetheless, with determination, I tore a sheet off the wall, folded it neatly, and stowed it into my jacket pocket.

Feeling energized, I ran back home, up five flights of stairs, and straight into the kitchen. Martin was standing at the stove in front of a pot of boiling water, opening a package of spaghetti.

“Look at this!” I said and put the sheet of paper on the table. “I found this by the

river.”

It was only then that I noticed Lucien was here too. I greeted him in a friendly manner, but he didn't give me a glance. Instead, he lit a cigarette, took a quick look at the leaflet, and then looked out of the window, uninterested. What's wrong with this guy?

“Dinner's almost ready,” Martin said, taking the leaflet in his hand. “You can take a shower first if you want.”

“I'll hurry,” I replied and left the two of them alone.

As the water poured down on me, I wondered how much alcohol can change a person. I didn't even have experience with that! Lucien had been pretty drunk when we first met. Although I questioned the authenticity of his kindness, I preferred it to being ignored. Martin had warned me about Lucien, but I didn't think much of it. Lucien giving me the cold shoulder unsettled me a little. But we didn't really know each other yet, and maybe a house dinner would help. After my refreshing shower, I returned to the kitchen.

“What's going on?” Martin asked Lucien as he set a bowl of salad on the table. “Have you been pulling an all-nighter again?”

Lucien blew out the smoke and took a sip of beer. “Only two more days,” he mumbled. “I'm in the final stages.”

I sat down in my new seat, diagonally across from Lucien, and leafed through a magazine beside me. But it was useless. Every third page was missing and the rest were torn up.

“Were you able to organize the transport?” Martin asked him, draining the pasta

water.

“Yes.” Lucien stroked his hair, revealing dark circles under his eyes. “Steven’s coming back with his uncle’s van.”

“Ah, that’s handy. That was the glassmaker, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” Lucien replied, looking out of the window once again, lost in thought. “Are you coming too?”

I would have loved to know what it was about, but my gut told me that this wasn’t the right time to ask. There was something about Lucien that made me feel unwanted. But maybe he’s just tired. Martin placed his heavy hand on my shoulder. “Of course! And I’ll bring the newbie with me.”

I was so startled that I winced. Martin chuckled with amusement and looked at me with his deep blue eyes. “So, how are your studies going? Have you got off to a good start?” Whenever Martin inquired about something, he always sounded very interested, as if he wanted to understand the person he was talking to. Even though we had known each other our whole lives, his probing left me feeling self-conscious. I let my gaze wander between his dark, bushy eyebrows so that I didn’t have to look him straight in the eyes. And if that didn’t help, I searched his otherwise impeccable chestnut brown hair for a loose strand. But there wasn’t one.

“Uh, yes ... everything’s fine,” I replied and glanced at Lucien.

He took a drag on his cigarette and stared out of the window again. He didn’t even move when Martin put a full plate in front of him and sat down at the table with us.

I folded my hands dutifully and bowed my head to say the table prayer in silence. Then I thanked Martin for the food. He was already holding his fork and forcing

himself to smile while Lucien transfixed his eyes on me. It was almost scary the way he pierced me with his gaze.

“Is something wrong?” I asked, reaching for the grated cheese.

Without saying a word, Lucien dropped the cigarette in the ashtray and finished his beer. He then picked up his fork and started eating. Martin grinned and turned to his plate. The situation irritated me. After all, Martin and I had grown up together and he had made no attempt to pray at all. “Why did you stop saying the table prayer?” I asked.

“I haven’t stopped,” he replied calmly. “I just don’t do it in front of others anymore.”

“But that’s ...”

He immediately raised his fork with precision, akin to a surgeon’s scalpel, and aimed it squarely at me. “Don’t say it!” His voice had become a low, menacing growl.

“But ...”

“Those aren’t your words, they’re your father’s! So shut up and eat now!”

I stared at Martin with my mouth open. His tone of voice was unusual, and the way he took a sip of water and continued eating was uncharacteristic of him.

The tension in the room became unbearable. I closed my mouth again, swallowed, and looked at my full plate as if it were the only one that could tell me what to do next. Lucien got up and grabbed two beers from the fridge. He kept one for himself and offered the other to Martin, who accepted it with a brief nod of thanks.

I didn’t know Martin like that. What on earth happened to him?

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Lucien

When I painted, my world was in order. Reality blurred behind a thick layer of acrylic paint and became a reflection of my dark side. As bizarre, dark, and obscene as the paintings became, every brushstroke had a calming effect on me and felt like a caress. I could concentrate on details for hours and shape them.

I relied on my intuition while working, but at a certain point, I became a perfectionist and found it difficult to complete my project. It was usually an exhibition that forced me to finish, even though I could have spent hours on it. But I needed these moments because without them, I would have lacked an anchor in my life and, sooner or later, I would have been lost at sea.

Despite studying art, I had managed to create a foundation for myself over the last year and a half so that I could make a living from art—without selling myself for anything. This was something I was proud of, as it was something pure. I wouldn't allow that to be taken away from me again for anything in the world. My art was my lifeline, and without it, I might have ended up in the gutter. Everything else I tried to do ended in disaster, and the fact that Martin hadn't thrown me out the door yet was nothing short of a miracle—or perhaps due to his faith. Love thy neighbor and all that.

Martin didn't believe in my theory about happiness. He insisted I simply had talent

and should, therefore, take this path. And not only did he believe in me, but he also cared and continued to support and encourage me.

“Lu!”

A voice broke through the roaring metal sound, clear amidst the clamor. I glanced over my shoulder and saw Martin standing in the middle of the studio. He was grinning as he held onto a plastic bag and a rucksack on his back. I hadn’t even heard him come in. I slowly came back to reality. Rays of sunlight streamed through the upper windows, indicating it was already evening.

“Oh, crap!” I switched off the music and jumped up. “I’m so sorry! I’m so sorry!”

“It’s all right,” Martin said.

“No! I’m so sorry! I had drifted off.” I rushed to the sink and washed out the brush.

“I’ll be right there. I’ll be quick!”

“Lu! Relax! Take it easy.”

I turned to Martin and frowned.

“You’re not late at all. I just thought I’d come and pick you up.”

I furrowed my brows and tried to make sense of it. Why was that? It didn’t make any sense at all. His university was nowhere near here.

“I was at a fellow student’s house. He lives near the gas station.”

“I see.”

I hurried anyway. Martin knew I didn't like having people here. The studio was my cave, where I could do whatever I wanted. I had settled in pretty well here. The only thing missing was a shower. But it was enough for a quick wash.

Meanwhile, Martin sat down on the couch, pulled a water bottle out of his shopping bag, and drank it in big gulps. "I know you're in the final sprint and all, but I'm just doing my duty as a friend." He took out a salmon sandwich and held it out to me. "I was at the gas station store and figured you might be hungry. When was the last time you ate?"

I laid the brushes out on a kitchen towel and grabbed the sandwich. "You're the best," I said, picking up my training bag. "Well, let's go then."

We left the studio together and made our way to the next bus stop. By the time we got on the bus a few minutes later, I had already eaten the sandwich.

Martin and I had been going to the gym together for a few months now, although we always lost sight of each other during the sessions because we each followed our own workout plan. But we weren't as dedicated as most of the others there. We were mainly focused on finding a balance, as we didn't get much exercise in our everyday lives. As difficult as I always found it to leave the studio for a training session, in hindsight, I was glad I had done it.

"I hope it's okay with you if I bring Jonah to the opening," Martin said back in the changing room.

"Sure."

"You didn't seem particularly happy when I said at dinner that I wanted to take him with me."



The evening was two days ago, but it was still very vivid in my memory. However, the evening when I met Jonah for the first time was even more vivid in my mind, even though I was pretty drunk by then. At first glance, Martin's cousin seemed like the epitome of innocence. The way he had looked at the ashtray, full of disgust and loathing, made me understand how he saw me: I was nothing more than dirt to him. But that was okay. For the last year and a half, I had resigned myself to the fact that I was the last scum. I just wished our new roommate hadn't noticed on the first night.

"He was praying," I remarked, casting a meaningful glance in Martin's direction.

He laughed. "What do you think? Jonah grew up just like me. Religion is important to him. Probably even more important to him than it is to me."

"What do you mean?" I asked, yanking on a fresh shirt.

"Well, no sex before marriage and all that."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Oh no! Poor guy! But don't tell me he's someone who denies the theory of evolution. That would really be going too far."

"Then he would hardly be studying agricultural science. That's what I told you."

"So what? These are exactly the kind of people who are nuts!"

"No, he's not that kind of person. He's interested in science," Martin said as he tied his shoes.

I watched him for a while. Martin had worked hard to get Jonah to move in with us and I couldn't refuse him—even if I wanted to. Besides, Martin was the main tenant. He wouldn't have needed my approval at all.

“Just do me a favor and be nice to him. Okay?”

“Does he have a disease?”

“No!” Martin laughed. “He’s perfectly normal.”

“As normal as you can be when you don’t have sex before marriage.” I just couldn’t resist the comment.

“Just respect it. Okay? And don’t tease him about it.”

“Why are you making such a big deal out of this?” I sat down to put my shoes on.

“I was in the same situation four years ago as he is now. I know what’s in store for him. And knowing you—”

“What? Are you serious?” I interrupted, gaping at him.

“Let me put it this way: You might scare him. Lucien, he’s not like you. Not everyone is as liberal about their sexuality.”

“I’m not being permissive...”

“Oh yes, you are! And don’t get me wrong—I admire you for that. But please don’t do anything rash.”

“Is that a compliment, or is there something else you’re trying to say?”

“Everyone has their own burden to bear. You should know that better than anyone.”

I didn’t at all like the sudden turn the conversation had taken, after all, I had been

stable for several months. “I’m fine,” I said to be on the safe side and remind Martin in case he forgot.

“Then please make sure it stays that way.”

I couldn’t help but roll my eyes.

“Are you coming home today?”

The question caught me off guard, and although I wanted to say yes, I faltered. Not because of the pictures I had to hand in, but because of Martin ... or rather because of Jonah. Martin cared so much about his cousin that I could hardly keep up. And why should I? Jonah had already made up his mind about me and I left a rather unfavorable impression. Playing the nice roommate now wasn’t my style. I didn’t care about Jonah anyway, and the more I found out about him, the more I realized that we lived in completely different worlds. Martin was obviously struggling to find a balance between his past and his current life, and the only way to support him was to stay away from the apartment. Besides, I was doing really well. “Maybe it’s better if I go back to the studio,” I said, pondering.

“When do you have to hand it in?”

“Tomorrow evening.”

“All right, then. But don’t forget to eat.”

I put on my best smile. “You know me, don’t you?”

“Exactly. If you haven’t contacted me by tomorrow evening, I’ll have a pizza delivered to you.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“And by the way, I gave Jonah the address too.”

“The address? What address? The studio’s address?” I asked in surprise. “Why would you do that?”

“For emergencies,” Martin responded before shutting the locker. “We both know that you overdo it from time to time. And as your personal physician, I thought it best to give Jonah the address.”

“You’re not a doctor yet.”

“But I will be soon.” He patted me on the shoulder and left the changing room.

“Hey! Wait!” I shouted as I slammed the door to my locker and hurried after him.

Jonah

On Saturday, Martin dragged me to an art exhibition. To my surprise, my parents held a deep appreciation for art, which led to my early visits to a museum or two during childhood. But this was my first time attending an exhibition opening in a gallery, and I felt completely out of place. Everyone appeared so sophisticated as if they had an innate comprehension of art. I felt like a hillbilly trying not to attract attention. Even from a distance, it was obvious that I didn't fit in. I was astonished by how effortlessly Martin integrated with the crowd, casually interacting and engaging in small talk with ease. I, on the other hand, walked through the white rooms in awe, admiring the works of the various artists.

One painting—measuring nearly seven feet in width and height—caught my attention. I stopped and frowned at the bizarre artwork. It depicted a strange world filled with sprawling plants around a ruin in a gloomy forest clearing. I could see monsters hiding in every corner with cat-like eyes and lizard-like tails. It was a captivating picture you could look at for a long time—there was always something new to discover. Intrigued, I leaned forward and read the name tag.

Lucien Gilliéron: The Hiding Place Of The Demons ; acrylic on canvas

I hadn't expected that. Impressed, I took a few steps back and viewed the painting again with a fresh perspective.

“Do you like it?” Lucien suddenly asked as he stood next to me.

“What is it?”

“You’ve never been into art, have you?”

“I ... uh ... well ... I don’t know,” I stammered, my uncertainty palpable in my voice. “And you painted this?”

“Come on. I’ll show you another one of my works.”

I followed him into the next room and found myself in front of another wall-sized painting. “Good God.”

It was a collection of monstrous figures which, despite their grotesque appearances, reminded me of Titania’s Awakening by Johann Heinrich Füssli. Lucien’s painting was full of cruelty, yet I was fascinated by it. My eyes fell on a small red dot affixed to the nameplate.

Sold?

“Can you make a living from it?”

Lucien looked at me as if my question had been presumptuous, but then a gentle smile crossed his face. In the four days we’d known each other, this was the first time I hadn’t felt like I’d done something wrong. My presence alone sometimes seemed to agitate him so much that he could only ignore me. But maybe he was just in a great mood. Out of nowhere, he draped his arm around my shoulder and dragged me along.

“Come on, now the party’s getting started. Martin! Are you ready?”

His fragrance wafted toward me, catching me off guard. I had expected him to reek of cigarette smoke, but he smelled like he'd just showered and hadn't smoked a single cigarette in the last few hours. I liked the smell and clumsily followed alongside him.

"Don't worry. It'll be fun," he assured me as he let go of me and picked up his coat from the cloakroom.

"Where are we going?"

"To Langstrasse."

"And what's there?"

"Alcohol."

My two roommates dragged me to Zurich's nightlife district, where we hit one bar after another. After what Lucien called a boring glass of water, I tried beer again. Although it was the same brand as the one we had in the shared apartment, I didn't find the taste quite as bitter as the first time. I even had to admit to myself that I was starting to like it. Still, I was grateful that Martin and Lucien didn't expect me to keep up with them. Their thirst seemed unquenchable, and I wondered when Martin became so fond of partying.

As we squeezed past people in an Irish pub toward the bar, someone called Martin's name from the other end of the room. Lucien hesitated and made a move to turn around and leave the bar, but Martin tugged on his sleeve and led us through the crowd, straight toward a slim blonde. She greeted him with a kiss on the cheek and a hug.

"Jessi!" Martin said, looking around. "Are you alone?"

“No, my brother and his buddy Steven should be here any minute.” She gracefully flicked her blonde hair over her shoulder and arched a brow upon catching sight of me. “And who’s that?”

“Jonah, my cousin,” Martin replied. “Jonah, this is Jessica.”

I stood there in awe, staring at her red lips. Her black top was about to burst at the seams, and she towered over me in her high heels by a few inches. I didn’t know if I was into her or if I just thought she was awful. She offered me a friendly smile, though it was evident she wasn’t interested. As soon as she spotted Lucien, she squeezed past me and threw herself around his neck.

“Lu! It’s been a long time!” she squealed with joy and pressed herself against him.

Looking for help, Lucien turned his head to the side to avoid the welcoming kiss. Upon spotting two vacant stools at the bar, he disengaged from Jessica, grabbed my arm, and pulled me along. “Sit down!” he hissed. He made it clear that he didn’t want Jessica around him at that moment.

“Is she a friend of yours?” I asked as I sat down on a bar stool.

“I wouldn’t call it like that. Her brother Marco is a friend of Martin’s,” Lucien replied, his tone tinged with boredom, as he ordered two beers. “I’d rather hang out with Steven.”

“Is she a model?”

“She certainly pretends to be. Are you into her? You can have her.”

“What? No! To her, I’m just air anyway.”



The subject of women made me uncomfortable because I had no experience, but before I could change the subject, Lucien scrutinized me from head to toe.

“She’s blind if she can’t see what she’s missing.”

I was taken aback. I hadn’t expected a comment like that. “I ... am just a normal person. Nothing special at all.”

Lucien furrowed his brow and observed me closely. “You’re handsome. You have a nice face. And a good figure too.”

My face flushed with heat. I’d never received such compliments before, especially not from a man. Well, coming from a painter, one can assume he perceives the world differently. Whatever that means. I changed the subject and tried to find out more about my new roommate. “How did you get to know Martin?”

“He was a year above me in medical school.”

“Oh, you studied medicine?” I asked in surprise.

Lucien put the money on the counter and stared at the coins. “I dropped out and went to art school.”

“Was it too stressful?”

“No,” he replied. He turned to me and wrapped his arm over my shoulder. “And you, Mr. Agricultural Scientist? Do you want to save the world from starvation?”

“That sounds honorable, but it probably won’t happen.”

“Why?”

“My parents expect me to take over the farm at some point. You have no idea how long I had to work on them to be allowed to come here in the first place. It was and is a liberation, even if only for a limited period of time.”

“Uh... hello, you're an adult. And in a few years, you'll have one of the best degrees in the world in your pocket,” Lucien said, taking his arm off my shoulder. “Then you can do whatever you want.”

“I was raised a strict Catholic.”

“What's that got to do with it?”

“My greatest achievement so far is that I was able to convince them to start studying science. It sounds like they're letting me out into the wide world for a while, like the Amish, with the expectation that I'll come back afterward.”

“You don't have to.”

“No, I don't have to.” I forced a smile out of politeness. “But you don't know my parents.”

“Hm... how depressing,” Lucien mumbled and drank from his beer.

“Basically, it's not a problem.” I didn't know whether I was serious or just trying to make myself feel better. “I'm doing well. I've even met a fellow student who attends church with me on Sundays.”

“That's good,” Lu replied into his glass, even more disinterested than before.

“You're welcome to come with me.”

“Where to?”

“To church.”

“Uh ... no, thanks.”

“Hey, guys!” a sudden voice called out from behind us. “Lu! Long time no see!” A giant who was into weightlifting patted Lucien on the shoulder and raised his eyebrows at me. “And you must be ...” he drew quotation marks in the air, “ the cousin . Hello, I’m Marco. And this is Steven.”

A guy stood behind Marco with a sleepy look on his face and raised his hand in greeting. Jessica pushed past me and snuggled up to Lucien. “Lu! Why didn’t you tell me it was the opening day? I would have loved to come too.”

Lucien mumbled something and looked around for help. But the two—or was it three?—beers I’d already had paralyzed my tongue. Add to that the crowd, the booming music, and the stifling atmosphere—suddenly, everything was too much for me. I slid off the bar stool and felt dizzy. I have to get out of here. I also felt a bit sick, so I slipped on my jacket.

“Where are you going?” Lucien asked in surprise, with Jessica still hanging on his neck.

“Home.”

“What, it’s Saturday. The evening has only just begun.”

“Yes, but I have to be up early tomorrow.”

“Oh. You were serious about church?”

“Yes.” Did he not believe me?

His expression softened. “Are you all right? Are you feeling sick?”

I wondered at his sudden concern for me, but as I watched him try to break free from Jessica’s hold, I realized he was just looking for an excuse to shake her off. But that wasn’t my problem. “Don’t worry about it. Everything’s fine,” I replied. “Have fun, everyone.”

“Do you know your way back home?” Martin asked behind me.

I just nodded and staggered out of the bar.

Jonah

The next morning, I was already dressed and seated at the kitchen table when Martin shuffled into the kitchen, his movements slow and drowsy, halting in front of the coffee machine. In a last-minute decision not to turn it on, he swept his hand across his face, accompanied by a faint, elusive hum.

I was glad about that because my head was pounding as if I'd drunk a whole bottle of vodka on my own the night before. Not that I knew what being intoxicated felt like, but having consumed only three beers with intermittent sips of water, it was evident that my tolerance was virtually nonexistent. "Are you coming?"

He gave me an exasperated look. "Huh?"

"To church," I gently reminded him.

"Oh..." Martin turned to me and blinked. "No," he said, switching on the coffee machine after all. "It's too early for me."

"It's half past nine," I said, though my words were drowned out by the noisy coffee machine. It was a relief when the machine finally spit out the last drops.

"It was late last night," muttered Martin.

“When did you get home? I didn’t hear you at all.”

“About... I don’t remember...” Martin opened the fridge and took out the milk.

“Three o’clock, maybe?”

“My God! Why are you awake already? And you came home alone? What about Lucien?”

“I still have to write a paper—that’s why I’m already awake. And Lu has moved on. I don’t know if he’s here by now.” He sat down at the table with me.

“I saw Lu’s paintings yesterday,” I admitted, my voice tinged with hesitation. “They were ... interesting. Why didn’t you tell me Lucien was exhibiting there?” I found myself taking it personally that Martin had withheld this information from me.

“I thought that was clear.”

“Didn’t you say he was studying art?”

“Yes, Lu is studying in the fourth semester.”

Then he must have started in the spring, right after he dropped out of medical school. How did he manage that?

“But... the exhibition... He sold this huge painting.”

“Yeah, it’s crazy, isn’t it?” Martin said, lost in thought.

“Then why is he still studying? The painting looked like something you’d find in the Louvre.”

“Well, he’s fortunate to have connections with influential people who are willing to pay a lot of money for art. That’s the only way he can finance his studies, his studio, and his room in a shared living. He works double shifts, so to speak, because he needs both: the degree and the money.”

“Does he not have parents to support him?”

“Unfortunately not.”

I felt in awe of Lucien. He was only two years older than me and made a living on his own. And I was kept on such a tight leash that I considered myself lucky to be here in Zurich at all. A glance at my cell phone told me it was time to go. Simon was probably already waiting downstairs.

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Although I had been living in Zurich for a few weeks, it was my first time attending Sunday Mass. I was taken aback and felt a tinge of irritation upon hearing the sermon, wherein the priest expressed remarkable openness toward same-sex relationships. I only had a few weeks left to find a priest who wouldn’t immediately break a taboo when my parents came to visit.

“Well, that was refreshing.” Simon zipped up his green jacket as we left the church.

In sheer disbelief, I turned my gaze toward him, questioning the sincerity of his words, for I had found the experience far from rejuvenating. My head was still pounding; the topic had instantly sent blood rushing to my head. “Are you serious? I mean... it was about...”

“Homosexuality?”

The word alone made my heart skip a beat. Simon burst into hearty laughter at the sight of my expression and stroked his small brown curls, blown up by the wind. My composure had clearly faltered.

“Oh, come on, don’t be so uptight.”

“I ... but ... wasn’t the priest a bit too open about this?” I couldn’t bring myself to say the word.

“Why would he be? It’s quite normal these days.”

“No, it’s ... unnatural.”

Simon’s expression changed and he stopped walking. His mouth twisted with concern. “Well ... there are different opinions on that,” he began diplomatically. He pierced me with an inquiring look as if he wanted to find out how I felt about the words. “And the way you argue, you seem to have grown up in a very homophobic environment.”

Homophobic? “Excuse me? I’m not...”

“I didn’t say you were,” Simon interjected. “But the Christians who still proclaim that today are ... homophobic. I’m sorry, there’s no other word for it.”

Everything inside me began spinning, a sensation that didn’t go unnoticed. Simon held out his hand as if to support me, but I backed away and took a deep breath.

“In the town where I grew up, it’s considered the eighth deadly sin. And everyone there agrees with it. You can’t imagine ...”

“What a shock that sermon just was?” Simon completed the sentence. “No, I really



can't imagine. But I'm sorry for you."

"I mean, how can you be so relaxed about it?"

Simon shrugged his shoulders. "My uncle is gay. There's nothing wrong with that."

"You're still in contact with him?"

"Of course!" Simon laughed. "He's my uncle. What do you think? That we should disown him? We live in the 21st century."

I didn't know what else to say. I hadn't been at all prepared for a conversation like this, especially for stumbling across this topic in a church service. Simon noticed my discomfort and offered me a kind smile.

Usually, Mass always had some kind of liberating effect on me, but this time, I felt miserable—even the fresh breeze didn't help.

"Don't worry so much," Simon said as we arrived at the courtyard entrance to my apartment building. "You're here in Zurich. Besides, this is the city of Zwingli."

"A reformer doesn't change the fact that I obviously grew up with homophobic hillbillies."

Simon ignored the side blow. "You'll find a way."

I stared helplessly at the floor for a while. When I glanced back at Simon, he had tilted his head slightly to one side and was peering past me toward the entrance.

"Who's that?" he asked, scowling. "Does he belong here?"

I turned around, followed his line of sight, and had to look twice to be sure. “Lu?” He didn’t even notice me, so I walked over to him. His face was white as chalk, with only dark shadows under his eyes. He leaned a shoulder against the doorframe, reaching into the depths of his pockets.

“Are you just coming home now?” I asked, pulling out my keys.

Lucien cocked his head to the side as a low grumble escaped his lips. His legs buckled, but I was able to catch him in time. “Oh man, you can hardly stand up straight.” While I was supporting him, I opened the front door. “Can you make it up on your own?”

He nodded and staggered past me into the stairwell.

“Was that your roommate?” Simon asked in shock as the door closed behind Lucien.

“Yes. One of them.”

“Okay ...” Simon widened his eyes. “Um, let me know if you’re looking for somewhere else to stay. We’ll have a room available soon.”

“Thanks, but that’s not necessary.”

“Well, I don’t know... He looked like a junkie,” Simon said, stunned.

I laughed. “Don’t worry, he’s harmless. He must have pulled an all-nighter.”

“All right, then. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yes. See you then!”

When I went up the stairs straight away, I caught up with Lucien on the second floor. He was holding on to the banister and mumbling unintelligible things.

“Of course ...” I chuckled. “You can totally make it on your own.”

He turned around to face me, but he lost his balance and stumbled toward me. I caught him just in time. “Careful!”

He placed his arms around me and his forehead on my shoulder. I held him under the armpits so that he couldn’t slip away. His slim body appeared well-toned and muscular. Martin had hinted that they went to the gym together from time to time, which somehow reassured me at that moment. Given Lu’s lifestyle, a bit of exercise would undoubtedly benefit him. He reeked of beer and cigarettes.

At that moment, I became aware of my proximity to him and stiffened. What is he doing? Isn’t that a bit ... too close? The word ‘homophobic’ rang in my ears and I gasped. Don’t act like that! You’re just imagining things. This is clearly just because of this stupid church service.

I was still confused and didn’t want to misconstrue the situation. My brain is definitely playing tricks on me. After all, no one has ever come this close to me before. However, every now and then, Martin pats me comfortingly on the shoulder. All is well.

But then Lucien raised his head, meeting my gaze as sunlight streamed directly onto his face. His green eyes shone like precious gems and took my breath away. For a second, it seemed as if he was completely clear-headed. He turned to me with an inscrutable expression before he leaned toward me again and came closer than anyone had ever come before.

6

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Lucien

I couldn't help myself. I had to smell him.

He looked like him!

Of course, I knew it wasn't him, but I was drunk as a skunk and saw Phil so real in front of me—after all this time. When I put my arms around Jonah, he stiffened but didn't move back. Rather carelessly, I leaned closer to him, inhaling the scent on his neck. He steadied me before I could lose my balance. A warm, woodsy aroma reached my nose, and I was relieved that it wasn't the scent I had secretly hoped for. Nevertheless, it made me think about how much I liked the smell, and I suddenly felt an intense craving. It was as if Jonah's hard body made me realize how long it had been since I had last hooked up with a man.

My hands were still on his shoulders. I straightened up and looked at him. Our lips were just a few inches apart. Everything was a blur except for his beautiful hazel eyes, and I lost myself in them. As I continued to hold onto him, my gaze slowly wandered over his face. His evenly shaped nose, the dimples in his cheeks, and his beautifully sculpted lips that resembled perfect seashells.

I wonder what it's like to kiss him.

Jonah opened his mouth slowly but hesitated to say anything. I looked deep into his eyes again. A few dark brown strands fell over his forehead. I shifted my weight so that I wouldn't fall over and gently placed my hand on his neck. A wince shot through my body, and I bit my lower lip.

"Um, Lu? Are you okay?" Jonah's warm voice snapped me out of my hallucinations. I swallowed.

Holy shit ...

"I'm sorry," I mumbled and stroked my face uneasily.

"It's okay," Jonah said with a breathtaking smile.

Damn!

I couldn't watch this any longer and turned away. I would have liked to take two steps at once to get to the top floor as quickly as possible, but as drunk as I was, I had to hold on to the railing even for the single steps. Jonah grinned and placed his hands on my back. With a little push, the climb went pretty smoothly.

Once I reached the fifth floor, I pushed open the front door, stumbled over the cursed threshold, and staggered through the hallway straight into my room. The door slammed behind me, bringing me to an abrupt stop.

What had just happened?

What did I do?

It didn't take much and I would have kissed him!

My eyes wandered to the photos on the wall. Most of them appeared blurry, except for one—Phil and me in Vietnam. For a moment, I hesitated to even approach the picture, but then I slipped off my coat and sat on the edge of the bed. The longer I stared into Phil's blue eyes, the more I felt like he was sitting right next to me. I felt his warmth and how he pressed his shoulder against mine. I caught the sound of his soft, mischievous laugh, envisioning him sweeping me into his arms, tossing me onto the bed, leaning over with a grin, and pressing his lips against mine.

The last time had been so long ago, and yet I could still feel it as vividly as if it happened yesterday. I just couldn't stop thinking about him. My senses were whirling. I felt the sand on my skin, heard the sound of the sea, tasted the salty air, and smelled the sunscreen on his skin. I tenderly stroked his full head of dark brown hair, looked deep into his eyes, and wrapped my arms around him.

The heat between us still lingered—a reassuring sensation, albeit momentarily. Because as soon as I turned around and realized it had just been a daydream, my heart froze to ice.

Over and over again.

And now our new roommate reminded me of him too.

This can't be true.

I rested my elbows on my knees, concealed my face with my hands, and fought to suppress the rising emotions. In the end, it was merely lust.

Yes, just lust. Because I have no feelings for Jonah.

Yet, the image of his lips returned to my mind's vision, prompting me once more to ponder the sensation of kissing them. I had to admit to myself that he was actually

totally my type. Two to three inches shorter than me, athletic figure—no wonder, given how much he went running.

I jumped up, all hot and bothered, running my fingers through my hair in frustration.

No! Stop it! He's Martin's cousin! An inexperienced, naive wretch. You're definitely not going to make life difficult for him with your problems. So pull yourself together!

My eyes went back to the photo with Phil. As always, the memories came in waves. Before they could crash over me like a storm, I threw myself onto the bed and buried my head under the pillow.

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When I woke up again, the alarm clock next to my bed read 6 pm. I felt like a zombie. My head was pounding, and my body was completely dehydrated. As I struggled out of bed, my joints creaked like those of an aging man. In pain, I dragged myself into the bathroom and stood under the shower, the hot water providing some relief. Afterward, I shuffled into the kitchen, where Martin was just sitting down at the table with a cup of coffee.

"Let me guess," I said and went to the fridge. "You're pushing yourself with your fifth coffee?"

"You know me too well," he sighed, sipping his cup. "Seriously ... this science homework is killing me."

I took some juice from the fridge, poured myself a large glass, and sat down in my seat.

"So, how was it?"

“Good.” He didn’t need to know about my night with a hot brunette. It wasn’t that I couldn’t share with him, but after I let a few colorful details slip in my tales, he mentioned he knew me well enough by now and suggested I could skip those parts. But with my short answer, I had obviously already told him enough.

“Man or woman?” he asked.

“Woman.”

His eyebrows twitched as if he had made a cross under Female achievements of Lucien G. on his imaginary list. We had often discussed my one-night stands, which never led to anything. Martin had often advised me to talk to people more before going straight to bed with them. But repeatedly conveyed to him that his notion of love didn’t resonate with me. Yet, he always concluded the discussion with his trademark closing phrase: “I only hope that one day love takes you by surprise.”

Just the thought of that caused me to roll my eyes in disbelief. But I still cared for Martin, naturally—no one was closer to me, which wasn’t surprising considering all the shit I’d been through; he’d always been there.

I grabbed a magazine from the stack and flipped through its pages, lost in thought. I had long since memorized every page and even knew which pictures I had cut out and where so that I could later use them to create collages.

Then Jonah entered the kitchen with an empty glass in his hand, which he filled with tap water. Those shoulders. Like those of a swimmer. No wonder I saw Phil when I was drunk. I could hardly look at him, so I lit a cigarette and brushed back my wet hair.

“Have you two eaten yet?” Martin asked, finishing his fifth coffee.



“You’re welcome to cook something,” I mumbled, blew out the smoke, and turned the page.

Martin smiled and stood up. “Jonah ...” He set the cup down beside the sink. “We could go to the thrift shop tomorrow. Why don’t you buy a table or hang some pictures on the wall?”

There was silence for a moment. I arched my eyebrows and glanced at them both with a questioning expression.

Jonah hesitated, his expression contorted with indecision. “I ... well ... I like my room the way it is.”

“Jonah,” Martin firmly said as he switched on the oven. “You spend your time in an empty room. Sitting on the bed with your laptop, working or reading.”

“So, what’s wrong with that?” he defended himself vigorously.

“It’s like you’re not even there,” Martin calmly said while putting cheese on the table and cutting off two slices of bread. “You stow your clothes and books under the bed so that your room is as empty as a prison cell. A bed and a lamp. To be honest, that worries me a little. It’s as if a ghost is living with us. Hang Jesus on the wall for all I care, but do something!” He then set the knife aside and regarded his cousin with concern. “Your parents are coming to visit soon. They’ll end up thinking you’re not being treated well here.”

Jonah’s sudden stiffness revealed his unmistakable sense of discomfort. When he noticed me looking at him— his lips are beautiful even when he’s serious— he left the kitchen in a hurry.

“Hey!” Martin shouted.

“Looks like you’ve hit a sore spot,” I remarked in a straightforward manner.

“What do I know ... I have no idea what exactly is going on inside him.” Martin stroked his hair back thoughtfully. “He’s still kind of a kid and hasn’t even had a girlfriend yet.”

“And why is that your problem?”

“It’s not my problem,” Martin replied. My question seemed to have irritated him a little. “You’re right. But let’s be honest—it’s not normal. A shared room shouldn’t look like a prison cell.”

“Just think of it as a white cube .”

“As what?”

“As a museum room.”

“And that’s better?”

“At least it has more potential than a prison cell.”

“Stop it!” Jonah suddenly shouted as he stood in the hallway, wearing his running clothes and putting on his cap.

“That was obvious. Now he’s off jogging again,” Martin remarked. “He’s acting like a maniac.”

The door slammed shut behind Jonah, his footsteps echoing as he descended the stairs. A glance out of the window indicated it was about to rain. I flicked the ash off my cigarette and said out loud, “It does have its charm, considering how many things

we surround ourselves with.”

“Are you taking his side now?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I’m just saying.”

Jonah

One week later, Martin's words still haunted me.

Why is he even interested in furnishing my room? A bed and a lamp were all I needed. There wasn't much else back home on the farm. In fact, on the day I moved in, I was surprised at how much stuff there was in Martin's room. An overflowing bookshelf, a table with a computer, posters of Ella Fitzgerald, John Coltrane, and Louis Armstrong hanging on the walls. At first, I didn't even know who they were, and now that I did, I still didn't see the point in hanging them on the wall.

It was Sunday again. I had just come out of the kitchen with a glass of water when I noticed the door to Lucien's room was open. That was unusual since he normally always made sure it was closed. A slender beam of light pierced the darkness of the hallway.

Ever since the argument with Martin, I kept wondering what Lucien's room looked like. Although the open door wasn't an explicit invitation, I couldn't resist giving it a push.

Initially, I didn't know where to direct my gaze. I was literally flooded with impressions, yet I walked into the room as if drawn by a magnet. The walls were covered with black and white photographs and concert posters.

A shelf loaded with books, records, and CDs was at the foot of the bed. Lucien stood by the desk, its surface obscured beneath a heap of painting supplies. He stuffed a stack of papers into a bag and tossed in two cans of beer. I was amazed at how neatly the bed was made, despite the books piled up on the small table next to it, almost causing the lamp to fall over. Above the bed, a few photos were pinned to the wall, while clothes spilled out from the chest of drawers behind Lucien.

He slipped into his woolen coat and wrapped a scarf around his neck.

Did he not notice me?

“Where are you going?” I asked.

He didn’t seem surprised that I was suddenly standing there. “Come with me and you’ll see.”

His grin somehow worried me. “But ... it’s Sunday.”

“So what? Who told you not to? Your mommy?”

I lowered my head, embarrassed. So that was the punishment for my curiosity.

“Hey, that was a joke!” He chuckled and slung the bag over his shoulder. “Don’t take everything so seriously.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, judging by the expression on your face, you must have been on the phone with your parents.”

He was right. My mother had reassured me, seemingly for the hundredth time, that I

didn't have to prove anything to her and could return home at any time, while my father believed in doing things properly if you were going to do them at all. "Make me proud!" had been his parting words to me ever since I started university.

"I don't know. It's already half past nine." He didn't need to know that my muscles had been twitching since the phone call, and I was seriously contemplating going for a run.

"That doesn't stop you from running around the city like a maniac," Lucien remarked casually, tucking a pack of cigarettes into his coat pocket.

Can he read my mind? That's almost unsettling.

His expression changed abruptly. His amusement gave way to an expectant look. "Come on, come with me! Screw the fact that it's Sunday—it'll be cool."

I glanced over my shoulder into the hallway, seeking assistance. Martin wasn't there and apart from the lame excuse that I had a lecture the next morning, I couldn't think of anything else to say. I also felt a tingling sensation in my fingers. Here was an opportunity to experience something new. Something that would allow me to rebel against the strict basic values and rules of my parents.

"Go grab your jacket," Lucien ordered with enthusiasm, nudging me out of the room ahead of him. "I'm ready to go."

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It had just stopped raining when we stepped out onto the street. Many leaves were on the ground and a cool wind was blowing through the trees.

All right, I definitely needed to work on my assertiveness and strength of character.

Maybe my common sense too.

Lucien dragged me to the same bar where we'd last been with Martin and ordered beers for both of us. He wasn't very talkative, and it seemed like he might already regret bringing me along. Lost in thought, he soon ordered a second beer. I kept checking the clock above the entrance. An hour had already passed, and I pondered how to bid farewell politely when he unexpectedly asked, "Why did you come into my room?"

I looked at him in surprise. My God, I didn't know myself. Although ... actually I did. But he didn't need to know that. I put the glass to my mouth, hid behind it, and shook my head.

"It would do you good to find something you like," he said, ignoring my silence, and took a sip.

"Something?" I repeated, putting the glass down more forcefully than I had intended. "There are things I do like!"

"Oh yeah, let me guess: the Bible?"

"Uh, yes!" I responded. That goes without saying. "And running."

"Then hang it on the wall and Martin will shut up," he said dryly.

His words irritated me, and although I didn't know exactly why, I found them offensive. And yet I froze, not knowing how to react. As I finished my beer and prepared to leave without comment, he ordered me a second one in all seriousness.

"You like beer, don't you?" A mischievous smile appeared on his face.

I sat down again and didn't understand anything. Not him. And me even less.

"You can admit that you like beer," he said, nudging the glass toward me. "No need to feel ashamed about it."

He's up to something.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked suspiciously.

"I want you to learn to have fun for once." He looked at me so seriously that I felt I had missed something.

Perhaps I had missed the joke, and he was about to reveal that he was teasing me. But instead, he patted me on the shoulder. "Just have a bit of fun," he said gently. "You won't lose anything."

An hour later, we were sitting at the bar laughing and I told him how Martin and I used to hunt mice and set them free during Sunday Mass at church. I got more and more into it and told more stories from my childhood, and when I wanted to ask Lucien about his, the bartender threw us out. "We're closing up, boys. Come back tomorrow. Thanks."

"Feeling good?" Lucien asked as we stood on the sidewalk.

"Great!" I was a little tipsy. "Why?"

"Come on."

By now it had also become quiet as we walked down Langstrasse, and once we reached the river, the city seemed deserted.



“Aren’t we going home?” I asked, following him.

“Yes, we are. We’re just taking a little detour.”

Beneath the bridge where I frequently jogged, he eventually halted and glanced around cautiously.

“We’re not doing anything illegal, are we?”

“Hmm ...”

What does that mean?

Lucien unzipped his bag, retrieved a stack of sheets and a roll of sticky tape, and started papering the wall under the bridge.

“1 welcome

5 perfect

13 confused

18 adult

23 outcast

completely degenerated”

“You wrote those?” I exclaimed in surprise.

“Don’t say that so loudly!” he hissed. “Only a few people know about it, and I want

to keep it that way. Do you understand?”

“They’re great. People read them. How did you come up with the idea of doing something like this?” I asked with interest, taking a sheet of paper.

“Oh ... it’s just art,” he replied modestly and stuck the last sheet on the wall. He then cracked open a can of beer and surveyed his work with satisfaction. “But maybe it will make people think.”

“Without a doubt. I’m convinced of that.”

Lucien regarded me with an inscrutable expression, his demeanor suddenly uncertain. His jaw tensed as though he contemplated saying something, but he chose to remain silent and headed home. I followed him in silence, a sudden sense of displacement washing over me once more.

“Why do you believe in God?” Lucien queried, halting midway through our stroll.

“Everyone believes in God,” I replied and turned to him. “Or at least in ... some kind of God.”

Lucien furrowed his brows and regarded me as though my words were utter nonsense. “You’re cute,” he said and kept walking.

“Don’t you believe in God?” I asked in surprise and followed him.

“No.” The answer came quickly, and before he continued, he lit a cigarette. “Why should I?”

I was so horrified that I simply didn’t have the words. When our eyes met, he rolled his eyes. “And now you look as if you pity me.” He appeared so sad as if he was

carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders.

“My offer still stands. You can accompany us to church any time.”

Lucien forced himself to smile and took a big drag from his cigarette. He exhaled the smoke loudly. His eyes jumped nervously from one point to the next. In an instant, vulnerability vanished, replaced by a coldness that enveloped him like armor. A profoundly dark gleam shimmered in his eyes. “You know, Jonah, your ignorance is enviable,” he said in an arrogant tone and took a sip from the can.

The sudden shift in mood caught me off guard, but I sensed that he had merely donned a mask—a shield to ward off something.

“Why are you judging me?” I asked calmly.

“You shouldn’t put everyone in the same box. So leave me alone.” As if he wanted to flee from me, he left me standing there and walked faster.

I watched him walk away, completely baffled. “But ... I’m not doing that.”

What just happened?

Before I could catch up with him and confront him, he entered the courtyard of our house.

Jonah

When I glanced at my watch, my heart stopped for a moment.

Crap! I overslept for the first time in my life.

I jumped out of bed and gathered my clothes. If I hurried, I could still make it to the second half of the lecture. But then a question popped into my head. What will people think of me if I barge into the middle of the lecture?

And should my unreasonable behavior really go unpunished? I was here in Zurich to study, not to spend my Sunday evenings hanging out in bars. I couldn't let myself get away with that.

Invisible forces were pressing down on me from all sides, as if God himself was trying to make me understand that I had sinned. And suddenly, I couldn't breathe. No, the afternoon lecture had to be enough. I hauled my suitcase out under the bed and changed into my training clothes.

I didn't mind the downpour and flooded streets. I ran like a maniac toward the lake, onto the Horn, through the Botanical Gardens, and back along the other side of the river.

Completely soaked and exhausted, I returned home around noon. When I pushed the front door open, Lucien was just coming out of his room. With tousled hair, puffy eyes, and a T-shirt, he looked as if he had just gotten out of bed.

“Are you crazy?” he asked as I removed my wet shoes from the stairwell and put them on the shelf.

“I missed the morning lecture,” I grumbled, still annoyed about it.

“Ah, self-flagellation,” he mumbled, inserting a cigarette in his mouth before shuffling into the kitchen.

I took off my wet clothes in the hallway and went straight into the shower. Under the hot stream of water, the thought of going to confession again crossed my mind. It had been nearly a year since my last confession, and while in Zurich, there were some things that I needed to confess. For instance, I had to master the art of declining when Lucien insisted on going to a bar on a Sunday night. I had to resist the allure of alcohol due to my low tolerance. Above all, I had to cultivate mindfulness to stay focused on my studies, which were my utmost priority.

Yes, confession wouldn’t be a bad idea to cleanse myself of my sins.

Dressed only in a pair of jeans, I went into the kitchen afterward and promptly ran into a wall of cigarette smoke. I headed straight for the window and opened it. Relieved, I turned around and saw Lucien—I hadn’t even noticed him. He was sitting calmly at the kitchen table in front of an open magazine, with a cup of coffee next to him and a lit cigarette in an ashtray. He glanced at me with a half-open mouth, as if anticipating a snide remark.

“Oh, hello ... didn’t see you there.” I don’t know why his presence bothered me for a brief moment. Embarrassed, I forced myself to smile.

Okay, just act normal. He seems to have forgotten our strange conversation from last night.

I filled a kettle with water and switched it on. As I grabbed a tea bag from the cupboard, I wondered if, as a new roommate, I had the right to say anything about the smell. After all, he was subjecting Martin and me to secondhand smoke, which we all knew was equally harmful. If he wanted to ruin his lungs, that was his choice, but I could feel the nicotine-filled air constricting my lungs while I went running.

Well, maybe it's better to talk to Martin about it first.

Although it seemed as if he didn't care about the odor of cigarettes—he even left his bedroom door open all the time—it was possible that he simply forgot to close it and would have been happy if someone had mentioned the smoking. On the other hand, Lucien was here, and I had the chance to sort it out here and now. I wondered if he was the type of person who would be unreasonable about this matter, but ultimately, it was about respect.

As I stared at the kettle, I continued to weigh my options.

If the cigarette smoke bothers Martin, wouldn't he say something by now? The way he talks about Lucien, the two of them seem to be very close. No, it's unthinkable that the two of them haven't already discussed it.

In the end, I decided to leave the subject alone today. Besides, Lucien was often in his studio, so the days when he polluted the air here were manageable. I poured myself a cup of tea and leaned against the kitchen counter, looking at Lucien.

He was still sitting there, cigarette now in hand, observing me as if he knew exactly what I had just been thinking about. His eyes wandered over my upper body. I tried to conceal it, but my eyebrows twitched in irritation, nonetheless. He didn't even try to

hide it. If I hadn't already been topless, I would have felt like he was undressing me just by looking at me. I felt a tingling in my stomach and became aware of my body that the path his gaze took felt like a gentle touch on my skin. A cold shiver ran down my spine, and I felt the cool breeze through the window brushing against my nipples. Although my stomach muscles weren't particularly pronounced, I felt each one distinctly in that moment. Embarrassed, I stroked my wet hair.

"Is something wrong?" I asked, trying to sound as confident as possible.

Lucien didn't seem to hear me at all. Lost in thought, his gaze wandered from my belly button down to the waistband of my pants. He cocked his head slightly, resembling an animal on the lookout, and bit his lower lip.

"Lu!"

His eyes locked with mine, and I felt as though I had been struck by lightning. You're handsome , he had said to me. You have a nice face. And a good figure too. My breath suddenly stopped. My chest rose and fell. My pulse quickened and a surge of heat rushed into my head.

What is going on here?

As much as I writhed under his intense scrutiny and wished to flee the situation, I hesitated. I didn't want him to stop this strange kind of caress. I wanted him to look at me. He had already ignored me too often.

Since he embraced me in the stairwell, something had changed. Was it because he had gotten so close to me? He had breathed in my scent. I felt his unshaven cheek against my neck, and his green eyes gleamed like sunlight filtering through the treetops, making the leaves dance.

I tilted my head slightly in anticipation, at which point Lucien averted his gaze and nervously plucked at his lips with his left hand. He appeared pensive, embarrassed, and somewhat melancholic, nervously tapping his leg. The cigarette between his fingers had burned down in the meantime. He stubbed it out before the ash could fall onto the table. Clearing his throat, he grabbed his coffee cup and retreated into his room without uttering a word.

In an instant, the warmth that had gathered within me dissipated, leaving me abruptly cold throughout. I immediately closed the window.

What just happened here?

I searched the walls for answers, but secretly, I knew exactly what had just happened: Lucien had enjoyed the sight of my naked upper body. And I liked it.

No! That can't be right.

I gasped, setting my cup down as I pressed my hand against my chest. Yet, my whole body tingled, and my skin burned with heat.

I should put some clothes on.



Lucien

Using the drawing folder as a base, I sketched a few charcoal drawings on my way to art school. Although drawing while walking wasn't ideal, my loose wrist allowed for a rough yet practiced style with charcoal.

Steven caught up with me, his face breaking into a broad grin as he greeted me. Despite his red eyes and tousled hair, he wore his Ralph Lauren jacket in his usual casual way and the top buttons of his Armani shirt undone. The biggest and most vain stoner I knew—and my oldest and most loyal friend.

“Last minute again?” he asked, pulling out a tobacco pouch from his pocket.

I merely let out a grumble, which was supposed to be both a greeting and a confirmation, and continued to concentrate on my sketch. Luckily, I had woken up before 12 o'clock this time, so at least I could walk at a leisurely pace. This also suited Steven—he could enjoy a smoke in peace before the class. Tucking his folder under his arm, he rolled himself a joint and lit it.

“Do you want?” he asked after the first puff.

“No, thanks.”

“You do realize what the assignment was?” he asked, squinting at my sketch.

“Modern still life. Right?”

“Uh ... close. That was last week. Nude is on the program today.”

I stopped and gawked at him in disbelief. “You sure?” His statement didn’t concern me yet, considering Steven was always stoned.

He pulled out his phone, opened the semester schedule, and pointed to today.

“Nude.”

Shit ... Okay.

I spontaneously drew the lines of the leaves longer and turned them into the lasciviously spread legs of a woman. From the apples, I sculpted the curves of the pelvis while the bouquet of flowers morphed into a wild mop of hair.

“That’s almost outrageous,” Steven commented on the passable drawing. “But will Professor Seeger approve of that?”

“Probably not,” I thought aloud, but first and foremost, I was just relieved to be able to submit something. “There’s nothing to be done about the fact that the guy doesn’t like me anymore anyway.”

Steven tried to suppress his laughter. “That’s your own fault.”

“Pff, nothing happened at all.”

“But you wanted to give him a blow job.”

“So? I still would if he took me off his blacklist for that.”

“I’m afraid he doesn’t seem gay or bi.”

I rolled my eyes and tried to forget the embarrassing situation almost a year ago. “I told you, I was just drunk. It wasn’t a hookup.”

“Of course, keep telling yourself that. It obviously felt different to him.”

Steven didn’t know what had really happened then. It had been a similar situation to the one with Jonah in the stairwell. There was a fall festival and exhibition at the art school. I found myself standing with Seeger in front of my painting, which he commented on in detail and praised. At some point, I stopped listening altogether. All I could see was Phil in him—every movement, every sparkle in his eyes. Even his voice sounded like Phil’s to me. That warm tone, so beloved, overcame me, and I couldn’t resist any longer; I simply kissed the professor.

Unfortunately, Seeger’s subsequent apology for his behavior—he had pushed me away so forcefully that I landed on the floor—couldn’t salvage our relationship. My actions had offended him deeply, and he couldn’t look past it.

“The man thinks I’m a pervert. I should be thankful he didn’t report me.”

“Well, that would have been going a bit too far,” Steven said, pushing the joint into the ashtray by the entrance.

I grimaced and muttered. “Whatever...”

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There were two nude models present. I loved approaching human forms in this way,

deciphering their proportions and turning simple shapes into figures. In my paintings, I still kept the human bodies abstract, although I would have liked to depict them in more detail—one of my weaknesses that I had to work on.

I was so absorbed that I didn't even notice someone standing behind me. It was only when they leaned slightly over my shoulder that I flinched, startled.

I guess Professor Seeger isn't that homophobic when he gets that close to me.

"You work with rectangles here too, Mr. Gilliéron." Without looking at me, he pointed to my male's torso with his pencil. "That makes it easier to depict the rotation of the upper body."

"Th-thank you."

Seeger walked over to Steven, who was sitting next to me, and glanced at his drawing. When I saw the professor from the side, I wondered how I could have had such hallucinations—he didn't look anything like Phil. It was different with Jonah; he looked much more like him. And that athletic body was so hot.

My eyes drifted back to one of the nude models. I'd been staring at the naked torso for over an hour now, but it just wasn't the same anymore. I kept thinking about that day when Jonah had come shirtless into the kitchen. I know I had devoured him with my gaze, but I just couldn't help it. The guy was so sexy and didn't even know it.

What a waste.

I just couldn't stop wondering what his lips tasted like.

His full, shapely lips.

When I imagined drawing Jonah, the sketch became much easier. And when I finally got down to the details, I became completely absorbed in the work. I shaped his lips, nose, and eyes, then worked out the upper body and shaded in the muscles. When my attention fell on the bulge in the tight underpants, I couldn't help but wonder what Jonah was shaped like.

Oh man! Get a grip!

Fortunately, the bell rang at that moment and I was able to pack up my stuff.

"Gilliéron! A word," Seeger called out as I moved to exit the room with Steven.

"I'll wait outside," Steven said, pulling the tobacco pouch with the weed out of his pocket to roll the next joint.

I cautiously approached Seeger, who was organizing our sketches into a folder.

"What's up?"

He glanced up and regarded me with a pensive expression for a moment. "Well, the application deadline for next year's semester abroad is in a week. Don't you want to apply?"

"Do you want to get rid of me?" I asked with a charming smile.

Seeger's face darkened. "That's not what I meant. I just thought it might be something for you."

Now I regretted saying that—it hadn't been my intention to provoke him at all. But somehow it became a habit over the last year. Every time Seeger had wanted something from me, he'd just ended up grumbling about some unimportant crap. The

fact that he was now reminding me of the registration deadline was unusual and very thoughtful and nice.

“I ... I won’t be able to do a semester abroad.”

“Why not?”

“Well ... I ... can’t afford it.”

“Oh. I didn’t expect that. I thought you came from a respectable family—though at times, your conduct leaves something to be desired. But well, if that’s the case.”

I stood there paralyzed and just stared at him. As my heart raced, I experienced a rollercoaster of hot and cold. I felt the urgent need to explain myself. “It’s not that I don’t want to. But I ... I make a living by selling my paintings, but at the moment I only have enough money until January. If I don’t sell something again soon, I don’t even know if I’ll be able to afford the next semester here.”

Seeger furrowed his brows, scrutinizing me intently. I didn’t care if he thought I was a liar. At least I had diverted the conversation away from my family.

“I don’t know whether to offer you my condolences or congratulations,” the professor said. “It would be a real shame if you didn’t finish your studies. So make sure you make some money.”

That made me breathe a sigh of relief. “I ... I’ll do my best.”

Seeger’s face even cracked into a smile before he nodded, indicating that I was dismissed. Thank goodness. I promptly turned on my heel and hurried out into the fresh air.

“What did he want?” Steven asked from amidst a cloud of sweet grass near the entrance, waiting for me.

“Nothing important. So? What are we doing?”

“I’d say an after-work beer is in order. Or do you want to go straight to the studio?”

“No, an after-work beer sounds wonderful.”

### Jonah

To my surprise, no one seemed interested in why I had missed the lecture that morning. It still upset me for days afterward. It was only the fourth week, and nobody oversleeps in the fourth week of study ... at least not me.

“What if I don’t show up here for several days because I’ve died? Won’t anyone care then?” I asked Simon.

“But you didn’t die. Relax!”

“Yes, thank God! But a little more sympathy wouldn’t hurt.”

“Maybe where you come from, it’s common for everyone to be interested in everything. But here in the city, folks value their privacy and tend to mind their own business. After all, you wouldn’t want to offend anyone.”

Growing up, I had ample space to maintain my privacy. I had to admit that here in the city, I had become one of those who fiercely defended their personal space. Not as strict as Lucien, whose bedroom door was always closed, while mine was usually ajar. But there was no way I was going to let Martin tell me how to furnish my room. I loved my room! It was quiet and helped me to concentrate. Prison cell or not. At least there were no unnecessary frills to stop me from studying.



Around eleven o'clock, I was lying on the bed reading, as I usually did, when I heard the door unlock. Martin was at work, so it could only be Lucien. The slamming confirmed my theory.

“Fucking door...” he muttered angrily.

As he walked past my half-open bedroom door, cigarette smoke drifted in. Shortly afterward, I heard the kettle bubbling, chair legs scraping across the floor, and the crockery cupboard being slammed shut.

What a noise!

When I heard a cup being placed on the kitchen counter, I slid forward onto the edge of the bed, realizing it was time to close the door. All of a sudden, I heard the clink of breaking china.

“Ah! Shit, man!”

I rushed out to check.

Lucien was standing in front of the kitchen counter, clutching his left wrist, his face contorted with pain. There was a smoldering cigarette on the floor, a broken cup in the sink, and a steaming kettle next to it. My eyes fell on Lu's hand. At least there was no blood.

“What happened?”

“Shit, man! The boiling water!” He picked up the cigarette and tucked it into the corner of his mouth.

I turned the faucet on, set it to cold, and grabbed Lu by the wrist. “You have to cool it

right away, man! Everyone knows that!”

“It’s not so bad,” he said.

“Not so bad? That was boiling water!” I pulled his hand under the cool stream and held it there. I released my grip only when I was confident he would follow my instruction. Recalling seeing cooling pads in the freezer once, I retrieved one and snatched a fresh kitchen towel before returning to Lucien. He leaned over the sink, both elbows resting on its edge. His left hand remained under the jet of water as he shielded his eyes with his right hand, gritting his teeth in pain. The cigarette was now in the sink.

“What a ... shit ...” he gasped.

“Come here,” I said, gently pulling his hand out from under the stream of water. “Where exactly did you get it?”

The burn hadn’t left any marks yet. Lucien indicated that it had run directly over the back of his hand. I carefully dried the area with the kitchen towel, noticing his long, elegant fingers. He had really beautiful hands.

God! Jonah! Pull yourself together!

I wrapped the frozen cooling pad in the kitchen towel and tied it around the scalded hand. When Lucien tried to tug it away, I pulled back. “Hold still!”

“Ow!”

I secured the cloth in place as best I could and wondered if any bandages were around.

Lucien winced and straightened up. Only then did I realize that he was pretty drunk and could barely stand upright. Again. “Why do you constantly feel the need to go overboard?”

He patted his pockets and found the open pack of cigarettes.

“No!” I firmly said. I snatched the pack from him and put it on the table. “That’s enough for today!”

“Spoilsport,” he muttered, fiddling with the cooling pad.

“Come on. I think you’ve had enough for today.” I put my hand on his back and escorted him out of the kitchen. On the threshold to his room, he stumbled, pulling me to the floor with him. He just laughed, which didn’t surprise me at all, given his condition. We were now lying in the middle of the room. “You’re really not that good with doors, are you?” I asked, helping him to lean against the bed. “Where have you been?”

Tilting his head back, Lucien stroked his face and sighed. “Where have you been?”

The desperate undertone in his voice caught my attention.

Me? Why me?

“There was ... that party,” he slurred his words. “And there was this girl ... Jessica. She just wouldn’t stop talking. She talked and talked and talked. I just couldn’t get rid of her.” He looked at me, drained. “She was so exhausting.”

“Oh, come on.” His story amused me, and I took off his shoes with a grin. “As if you wouldn’t like it. Just enjoy it—I’d be glad of so much attention.”

He allowed me to help him like a child; even as I unbuttoned his coat, he remained quietly seated. Almost a little too calm, I realized. When I tried to help him remove his coat, he didn't move a bit.

“What's wrong? Are you feeling sick?”

Lucien opened his mouth and licked his lips. “I told you, you're handsome.”

What the hell is this now?

“Yeah, but ...” I couldn't think of anything to say.

“You really are handsome.”

“What...?”

He put his hands on my cheeks and kissed me on the lips. Just like that. As if his lips were aflame, a surge of heat swept through me. Fireworks went off in my head. His soft lips were downright electrifying. An alternating bath of hot and cold made me shiver, the movements of his lips penetrating me like music. I felt the rhythm and followed it. Lucien became more impetuous, taking possession of my lips as greedily as if his life depended on it. And God, being so desperately wanted by him triggered an almost uncontrollable lust in me. I kissed him, breathing in his breath, gasping for air again and again. Lucien stroked the back of my neck with his hand, sucking on my lips and leaving me utterly powerless. When his tongue tried to make its way past my teeth, I willingly let it in.

It wasn't until our tongues touched that alarm bells started ringing in my head. No, it was more of a siren, similar to an ambulance. And it drained all the blood from my head. All the air left my body. Startled, I pushed myself away from him and landed on my butt with a horrified gasp. “What are you doing? I'm not ...”

Lucien ran his hand over his still damp lips, breathing heavily, and looked at me with shining eyes. “Does it matter?”

My heart was pounding like crazy.

God, that kiss was good!

I could still feel his lips on mine. Every fiber of my being yearned for them as though they were a drug. “No! That’s not right!” I shouted and jumped up.

No, no, no! It’s unnatural!

I rubbed my face, trying to clear my head while pacing back and forth in front of Lu.

Don’t be seduced ... don’t be tempted ... Is that it? The temptation? Is Lucien the temptation?

“Holy Mary, mother of God! I really should go to confession.”

“I thought they’d done away with that long ago,” Lucien said as he now struggled to peel himself out of his coat.

“What?” I shook my head in irritation. “That was Luther, man! I’m Catholic!”

“Hm. Then maybe you should get out,” he mumbled as he crawled onto the bed and slumped down. “Confession is ... meh ...”

Stunned, I stood there staring at him.

Is he asleep? Doesn’t he care about any of this? How can he sleep so easily when his tongue was just inside me?

I took a deep breath.

My God ... And ... I liked it!

I let out an exasperated growl and ruffled my hair, then I felt dizzy. Upset, I hurried out of the room.

My first kiss! Is this a joke, or what?

### Lucien

I received an unexpected offer to participate in a group exhibition, and as it was to take place in a prestigious venue where people liked to buy a lot of art, I accepted. The space had become available on short notice, and the curator told me that Professor Seeger had recommended me. That surprised me. Whether he had done it out of pity or conviction didn't matter to me at that moment. I was simply happy to have these two walls to fill with my paintings. Every art show I did boosted my rep, and every sale meant I could chill a few more months without borrowing money from Martin.

I only had a few days to hand in my two paintings, which suited me perfectly under the circumstances. As long as I concentrated on the art, I wouldn't annoy my roommates anymore, especially one roommate.

Martin knew me, knew what made me tick and how to deal with it. I also knew what I could expect of him—and, above all, when. And right now was not a good time for such a confession, given that his deadlines were looming.

And as far as Jonah was concerned, I was in uncharted territory. I'd promised Martin I wouldn't scare him, but the way he'd looked at me after the kiss, I'd actually done a good job of it.

Shit ...

“Helloooo!” I heard from somewhere far away. “Earth to Lu!”

“What?”

I had been so engrossed in my work and thoughts that I hadn’t noticed someone coming into my studio—again.

“Steven ... what ...” Frowning, I glanced at the upper windows. It was already dark.

“Here! You need to eat something.” Steven placed a can beside me on the floor and ambled over to the couch, promptly rolling himself a joint.

“Beer?”

“Liquid food.” He unfolded a paper and crumbled the weed into it. “So, what now? Are we going to the party or not?”

“What party?” I still hadn’t quite come to reality; Steven was already taking a drag from his joint.

“Check your cell phone, man. There’s a gig at Marco’s rehearsal room today. It’s like a dress rehearsal. The release party is coming up soon.”

“Oh ... that was today?”

“Do you even know what day it is? And why are you still sitting here—didn’t you hand it in yesterday?”

“To finish this.”



I pointed my brush at a seven-by-seven foot canvas lying on the floor. If the muse had kissed me and I was in the flow, I had to take advantage of it. Because if I were to get a place at an exhibition at short notice, it would be an embarrassment to have to cancel because I didn't have any paintings in stock.

"It looks more than finished to me," Steven said, taking a drag from his joint. "Come on! Give yourself a jolt. It's Thursday."

This meant I had already spent thirteen days in the studio. As I always changed into work clothes first, my clean everyday clothes were still hanging in the wardrobe. But I desperately needed a shower.

"Have you noticed how terrible you look?" Steven remarked casually. "A bit of socializing would do you good."

"Is there a shower there?"

"Uh ... it's a rehearsal room—I doubt it. When was the last time you were at home?"

I went to the sink, cleaned the brushes, and quickly washed myself. The cleaner I became, the more aware I became of my greasy hair.

I still had some shampoo lying around somewhere and rummaged through the cupboard where I kept water cups and paper towels. It wasn't the first time I'd gone to a party from the studio. And sure enough, in addition to razors, skin cream, soaps and bandages, I also found some shampoo. The sink was big enough to hold my head completely under the water, so I washed my hair as well. As I rubbed it dry with a towel and saw my reflection in the mirror, I noticed dark circles under my eyes that hadn't been there a week ago. Steven called out from the couch, "And while you're at it, shave! You look terrible."

For a stoner, he had really sharp eyes. But he hadn't been accepted to art school for no reason. The guy had an eye for detail like no other. After I'd shaved and washed my face, he looked over at me from the couch and nodded with satisfaction. So I got dressed and prepared myself.

"I hope there are some girls there too," Steven said worriedly. "The last time I was at a party in the rehearsal room, it was all men. That really sucks."

"That's not a bad thing."

"Says the guy who doesn't care whether he's top or bottom. That's what they say, isn't it?"

Hearing that from Steven's mouth made me smile. The good guy sometimes didn't even realize how funny he was. "I'd be happy if there was something to nibble on," I said and accepted the can of beer Steven had brought me.

"Do you want to stop by the gas station to be on the safe side?"

"No, I'll take my chances," I replied, pushing down the tab to release a fizz before taking a big swig.

I wasn't particularly stingy, but with money tight, I avoided splurging on an expensive sandwich from the gas station, especially since it had been sitting there all day. If I had to, I'd rather get a kebab from Langstrasse on the way home. "Where is this rehearsal room?"

"It's a ten-minute walk from Tiefenbrunnen."

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When we arrived, the concert was already in full swing. As expected, the rehearsal room was a dingy basement in some office building, but at least it had a stage and several seating areas. And to Steven's delight, there were women there too. They had gathered in front of the stage like groupies and idolized the singer.

He wore a black tank top and resembled a rock star with his long brown hair and fully tattooed arms. I had to admit that he also had a beautiful face and an impressive voice. "What happened to the old singer?" I asked Steven as we grabbed a beer at the makeshift bar.

"I think they unceremoniously kicked him out after he showed up." Steven swayed to the rhythm of the music, even though I was aware that the sound was a bit too acid for his taste. "Noé, that's his name. He's got a great voice!"

"Hm..."

"Oh... no. Lu, I know that look. Stay away from that guy. They say he's a slut and will do anything for money. His reputation is a thousand times worse than yours."

"I don't know what you ... Uh, what? My reputation?" I hadn't realized I even had one. "What do you mean by that? What's being said about me?"

Steven swallowed. "Well ... yeah, uh ... I don't know exactly," he mumbled, taking a drink from his beer.

"Now spit it out already!"

"Well, that you're a player and don't think much of love ... and all that."

"That's true," I admitted unabashedly. But then I frowned. "And all that? What do you mean by all that?"

Steven was beating around the bush. “Well, you hear a lot of things. Some say you’re a real dominant, and others say you let yourself be treated worse than a dog. It’s all that S/M stuff.”

I grimaced in irritation. Then I burst out laughing and could hardly contain myself. “That’s doing the rounds? Where did you get that from?”

“It doesn’t matter. Anyway, the girls are really insecure because they don’t know what they’re getting themselves into with you.”

I sighed. “You know I’m open to everything, but I’ve never done anything my partner didn’t want me to do.”

Steven squinted over at me. “Where do you always find people like that?”

“They’re everywhere.” I let my gaze wander around the room. The conversation awakened my hunting instinct, and I could feel how my body had been under far too much tension for the last few days. I grinned at Steven. “Come on, let’s have some fun.”

We ended up in a group gathered around some couches where a bong was being passed around—people were accordingly stoned. Somehow I felt comfortable here, hanging out, smoking a cigarette, drinking beer ... just like when I met Phil.

It had been a gig by Marco’s band and Steven had gotten high on weed. My beer was empty, and as I was walking to the bar, I’d bumped into this handsome guy. His clear eyes and genuine smile immediately captured my attention, prompting me to spontaneously invite him for a beer. When he said he wouldn’t drink alcohol or take any other drugs at all, I was hooked. That was the last beer I drank for a long time.

Reveling in this nostalgic feeling, I left Steven with his stoner friends and strolled

around the rehearsal room for a while. I bumped into familiar faces here and there, chatted with them about God and the world, and was introduced to new people.

As soon as the band finished their session, music started playing from the speakers. I was engaged in conversation with a couple of women I knew from art school when Jessica sauntered into my line of sight. She hadn't seen me yet but was heading straight for me.

Oh no ... I was absolutely not in the mood for her—not then, not ever, really. She might have appeared nice and all, but only to everyone else. With me, she always behaved like a fucking teen on a sex drug.

“I’m going to get some fresh air,” I said to Andrea, who also saw Jessica coming.

“Sure thing. Get lost.” She chuckled and offered me a knowing pat on the shoulder.

Like a thief in the night, I crept past the people, hoping Jessica wouldn't spot me. And I was lucky, because when I glanced over my shoulder, she was talking to Andrea.

Lucky me. As I reached the entrance, the notion of fresh air didn't seem so bad. Climbing the stairs, I emerged into the cool night. Under the canopy, I lit a cigarette and took a deep breath.

A short distance away on the sidewalk, Marco and his bandmates were discussing the gig and appeared quite content, which was likely a positive sign considering the upcoming release show. As I didn't want to intrude, I remained under the canopy, leaning against the letterboxes, and smoked my cigarette in peace. I enjoyed the silence and the fresh air—a stark contrast to the rehearsal room.

“Lu!” Marco called out. “How did you like it?”

“Good,” I replied without moving. “You guys rock.”

“See!” Marco exclaimed, turning to his bandmates. “This is going to be great!”

Three of them finally bid goodbye, and Marco pulled the new singer along with him. “Noé, this is Lucien. Lu, this is our new singer, Noé.”

My first impression was confirmed: Noé was a sight for sore eyes. His long hair was now knotted at the back of his head, and he looked at me from his deep dark blue eyes. Noé was slim, his every movement was lascivious, and he was bursting with sex appeal. And that distinctive jawline was striking.

It seemed that we exchanged prolonged glances, much to Marco’s discomfort, without either of us thinking to break the silence. Marco cleared his throat. “Oookay...” he said, his tone wavering with indecision. “I’ll ... go and have a piss.”

As soon as Marco went inside, Noé smiled—not embarrassed or anything, no, he was clearly flirting with me and knew exactly how to do it. “I saw you from the stage.” His voice was raspy and totally sexy.

I opened my mouth to say something but couldn’t find the words. And as Noé stepped closer, a cold shiver ran down my spine.

Smile, Lu!

I put on my charming smile and licked my lips. “You were really hot up there ... on stage,” I said, and I wasn’t even lying. The man was so hot. Even my cock saw it that way, making itself known with a twitch.

“We could have a bit of fun together,” Noé said, shrugging his shoulders innocently.

I glared at him and tried to read his expression to see if he was joking. But he seemed to be serious. I bit my lower lip and smiled. “Okay.”

Noé opened the front door and let me go first. Instead of going back down to the basement, I ascended to the landing. The automatic light didn’t reach here, and it was comfortably gloomy. I turned to Noé, grabbed him by the upper arms and pushed him back against the wall. He smiled contentedly, appearing quite at ease in his role as the prey, yet his eyes sparkled with the greed of a predator. I stroked his chest, up to his neck and touched his beautiful lips. Unable to hold back any longer, I kissed Noé passionately and he responded with equal fervor, our kisses igniting a fiery intensity between us. Our tongues entwined and we took each other’s breath away.

I pressed my body against his and elicited a sweet sound from him. The heat inside me increased more and more, and when Noé slipped his hands under my shirt, he finally set me on fire. Fireworks ignited in my head and my skin tingled from head to toe. We devoured each other more and more, and while Noé traced the contours of my body, I pressed my pelvis against the bulge in his tight jeans. He gasped for air, and I grabbed him by the neck and pushed my tongue even deeper into his mouth. Full of desire, I rubbed my hard-on against his. Noé was bittersweet—until the pressure in my pants became unbearable. When he fiddled with my belt, I briefly opened my eyes, craving a glimpse of his beautiful face.

And suddenly, I saw Jonah in front of me.

“Woah!” Startled, I tore myself away from Noé. My heart had stopped for a moment and I was out of breath. “What the hell ...”

But it wasn’t just me who was totally out of it. Noé also seemed to have been startled at the same moment. “I’m sorry, I ...”

“Me too.”

Yes, I'd had quite a few drinks, but nothing like this had ever happened to me before. Noé approached me and I eyed him suspiciously. The sight of him was breathtaking. But as much as I wanted to concentrate on him, Jonah was buzzing around in my head. "I don't know if I ... can."

Bloody hell! Those words were coming out of my mouth!

"It's not your fault," I replied immediately, and Noé forced an outrageously charming smile.

"How about if I ...?" He glanced provocatively at the bulge in my pants. "This way we can both think about whoever is bothering us at the moment."

Before I could even consider declining the offer—though I'm not sure if I would have—Noé knelt before me, unzipped my pants, and got to work.

Yes, I thought of Jonah. And I imagined that it was him who was sucking me off with such dedication.



### Jonah

Frustrated, I glanced at one of Lucien's paintings and felt annoyed at being at an exhibition again. It was all because Martin had left the stupid flyer on the kitchen table when my parents were visiting. My mother insisted on making a detour to the gallery before our planned visit to the restaurant, and it felt like my punishment.

Lucien had stolen my first kiss and I had even liked it too. As a consequence of my failure to resist temptation, I found myself seeking forgiveness from God for days, and I continued extending my running route—Lucien had recently dubbed it self-flagellation.

All around me, people were swirling glasses of wine and having sophisticated conversations. To top it all off, my parents were embracing the role of art connoisseurs amid the modern, youthful art scene. They proudly discussed our original Hans Erni painting, which adorned the wall above our dining table at home.

Since no one seemed to be paying attention to me, I ventured into the next room, feeling anxious and hopeful about encountering Lucien. There was a picture of him in this room too. It was unmistakably dark and confusing. The angels, appearing to clash like monsters, were downright grotesque and evoked a sense of confinement within me. After all, angels were a symbol of goodness, grace, and hope for me. They were God's messengers, the protectors of mankind. But what Lucien had depicted here

seemed to be evil personified, trampling on people with all its might and bringing them hell on earth. I let my gaze wander over the other pictures in the exhibition. Lucien's art definitely stood out and was distinctive from the rest. I looked at Lucien's paintings again.

It's hard to believe he painted that.

I stood there for a while, feeling a sadness welling up inside me, heavier than the weight of my insignificant problems. Who was I to take myself so seriously? Yes, I messed up, but I was back on track. There were much worse things in the world than my mistakes.

Suddenly, Lucien appeared next to me. I caught a glimpse of him from the corner of my eye, but some strange force made it impossible for me to look at him as I stood transfixed, stubbornly staring at the painting. It had been two weeks since the night he kissed me, and we hadn't seen each other since then. I was grateful for that because it gave me time to digest the situation. But at that moment, I wasn't so sure I was really over it. I would have loved to turn to him and look him in the face. I had secretly been looking forward to our reunion. I wanted to look into his green eyes and the lips that had kissed me.

... that I had kissed ... Oh damn!

"Do you like it?" Lu asked in a soft voice.

"I ... don't know."

"Would you like to see more of it?"

Is he still talking about the paintings?

After all, he only had two on display.

Lucien was standing so close that our arms were touching. I suddenly felt very hot. My heart was beating in my throat, but I didn't dare take a single step away from him. I nervously bowed my head and took a deep breath. Summoning all my courage, I met his gaze. He pressed his lips together, noticeably struggling to maintain his attention on the painting. His breathing was shaky as he gave me a brief, shy look, which he averted again. I had never seen him so tense before.

Is it because of the exhibition or ... because of me?

He was pale and appeared sleepy.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

He turned to me so slowly, as if he had to force himself to do so, but his gaze softened as soon as he looked at me. He tried to smile and wrapped his arms around himself as if he were freezing cold.

Behind him, I saw Martin and my parents enter the room. When my mother saw me and waved to me, I stepped back from Lucien and stroked my hair sheepishly. He glanced back at his painting, his expression resembling someone caught in a downpour.

"Lu!" Martin said when they were only a few steps away from us. "May I introduce you to Jonah's parents? Auntie ..."

But Lucien simply lowered his head and hurried out of the room, looking like a defeated dog, without uttering a word.

"Uh ... Anyway," Martin said. "That was our roommate."

“And this is his painting?” my mother asked with interest, stepping closer to the picture.

“What happened to him?” my father grumbled.

“What do you mean?” I asked, irritated.

“Well, looking at it, he seems to be a pretty unbalanced young man.”

“Yes, that’s just Lu,” Martin replied, trying to grin away the tense mood.

“I would have loved to have a chat with an artist. Somehow that was very rude of him just now.” My mother rarely made a secret of her indignation.

“Maybe he didn’t hear me,” Martin started again.

I was amazed that he was trying so hard to get Lucien out of the line of fire. In an instant, I felt compelled to support Lucien. He looked as if he hadn’t slept for several nights. “He’s probably just exhausted,” I said nonchalantly.

I hadn’t expected all the attention turning toward me. My father narrowed his eyes suspiciously and my mother frowned.

“Well, I haven’t seen him once in the apartment in the last two weeks,” I said. “He’s probably been in the studio working around the clock.”

God! Help me! What am I doing?

Defending Lucien felt like I was lying. He was the one who upset me so much. But instead of being angry with him, I now felt like I’d undressed for him in front of my parents.

“Yes, that’s probably it,” my mother said and moved on to the next painting.

I silently followed them through the exhibition and kept catching myself looking out for Lucien. The whole situation made me so nervous that I finally went to the bar and got my first glass of wine. I drank it in large sips and returned to my parents with a glass of water. Relief only came when my father nervously glanced at the clock and said it was time to go. I knew the restaurant was only a ten-minute walk away and we were way too early, but I was happy to get out of here.

I spotted Lucien near the checkroom. He was standing under the stairs with Jessica, a glass of wine in his hand, while Jessica smiled in front of him, gently playing with the collar of his shirt and whispering something in his ear. Lucien seemed bored as he leaned against the wall, sipping his wine.

As soon as he noticed me, he couldn’t take his eyes off me. I found it difficult to look away, and when he finally disappeared from sight, I was overcome by an unsettling feeling that I had done something wrong. I thought about turning back, but what should I say to him?

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My parents stayed in Zurich for the whole weekend and I was their tour guide. Our itinerary included visits to museums, the theater, the zoo, and leisurely strolls along the lake. To top it all off, I wasn’t even spared a boat ride.

The visit was exhausting, with each day involving justifying my decision to pursue my studies in front of my parents. After attending church on Sunday, they finally departed for home, leaving me feeling relieved and utterly exhausted as I collapsed into bed. I envied Lucien, who obviously couldn’t be bothered to do such things.

On Monday, I was running around the city like a madman again, trying to relieve the

pressure that had built up inside me over the last few days. When I got to the Kornhaus Bridge, I saw that the wall had been papered with new leaves—green paper this time.

After Lucien didn't show up at the apartment after the exhibition, I was glad to see this sign of life, especially since he hadn't looked particularly well. It was only later that I remembered what I should have done when I left the exhibition: I should have gone to him and taken his wine glass. I should also have sent Jessica away and sent him home so he could get a good night's sleep. But I didn't even have the courage to look at him again.

When I was close enough to read the words on the sheet, my breath caught in my throat.

“I will

Try with my lips

Believe with my eyes

Behave naturally

According to the laws of nature

And resist

The prohibitions of culture”

“What ...” I angrily ripped a sheet off the wall and pulled out my phone. Martin had given me the address of Lucien's studio as well as the phone number in case of emergencies.

“What kind of emergencies?” I had asked and the response was “He hardly has any signal there.”

This might not qualify as an emergency, but I wasn’t willing to wait around indefinitely for him to return home. Who knows how long that could take. So I tucked the paper into my pocket and dashed through the city to the given address. I found myself in front of a large factory building. There were a few company signs at the entrance for the offices on the upper floors, but there was no sign of artists’ studios. As I entered the building, a young woman approached me.

“Excuse me, I’m looking for the studios.”

“In the basement,” she replied. “Who are you looking for?”

“Lucien.”

“Ah, Luuu,” she said with a transfigured smile. “Just follow the music.”

Not quite as energetic as on the way here, I descended the stairs. At some point, music did indeed reach my ears. The further I walked down the dimly lit corridor, the louder it became. It came from the last room at the end of the corridor. As I stood outside the door and heard the angry shouting, distorted guitars, and rolling drums, I grimaced.

You can hardly call that music.

I hesitated.

What am I doing here anyway?

But then I remembered the poem and pulled the sheet out of my jacket pocket. Just

seeing it again made me angry enough to crumple it up and walk into the studio with determination.

I entered a large, brightly lit room. During the day, the upper windows must have let in a lot of sunlight. Brushes, paint cans, tubes, and spatulas lay on a long wooden table, and there was also a laptop with a stack of newspapers and magazines next to it. There was a printer under the table and a sink and fridge next to the entrance. Canvas of all sizes and several easels leaned against it. On the wall in front of me were three paintings that were probably still being worked on, and a large one was lying on the floor. Aggressive metal music blared from a nearby CD player as I spotted Lucien. He lay sound asleep on a dark green sofa, with his face turned toward the wall.

I switched off the music and kicked the couch. Lucien turned around, startled, and opened his eyes. He looked so innocent in his dirty painter's pants and white shirt. His hair stood up in all directions, and when he blinked at me, he looked strangely cute in his confusion. Before he could say anything, I held out the piece of paper to him. "Why are you doing this?"



Lucien

I didn't understand anything. After working like a maniac for almost two weeks, the party in the rehearsal room the day before the opening hadn't been such a good idea after all. The thing with Noé got me thinking, so I had returned to the studio straight after and worked like crazy until Sunday evening. After hanging up the new poems late in the evening, I finally found some peace and drifted into an almost comatose sleep. I woke up a few times to the music playing on an endless loop, but in the end, I was too exhausted to turn it off.

The kick against the couch had woken me from a deep sleep. My heart was racing, and I was breathing heavily. My whole body was on alert. As I became aware of the silence, I glanced nervously at the CD player. It was still in the same place, so it hadn't fallen down due to a quake or something.

Jonah stood in front of the couch and held a sheet of paper with the latest poem in front of my nose. I stared at it dumbfounded for what seemed like an eternity before my mind slowly started functioning again.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked sternly.

“Bloody hell ...” I rubbed my eyes. “Is that really why you're here?” I slowly got to my feet. My entire body ached, particularly my head. My mouth was completely dry,

and I felt incredibly weak. Like a zombie, I dragged myself to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of water. Downing half of it in big gulps, I could feel it coursing through my body. With a sigh of relief, I tilted my head until it cracked.

“Now tell me!” Jonah demanded behind me.

I put the water down and turned to face him. He still held the green paper but no longer held it out to me. He looked at me with a serious expression.

“I told you not to take everything so personally.” He wasn’t my only source of inspiration.

“That’s insulting!”

“That’s art.”

“I’m not your muse!” he shouted indignantly.

We were silent for a moment, and I noticed Jonah’s eyes fixate on the overflowing trash can. It was full to the brim with empty beer cans and takeaway food wrappers that had accumulated over the last two weeks. The expression on his face conveyed a sense of shock, which I found unsettling, although I was already aware of it. I didn’t need a mirror to know I’d gone overboard. But I had sold both paintings during the opening. It had been worth it; my next semester was secured.

I nervously ran my fingers through my hair. Usually, I wouldn’t mind being caught off guard in such a state, but with Jonah, it felt different. I didn’t want him to witness me like this—exhausted and utterly drained. He regarded me with the gaze one would give to a forlorn stray dog.

“My parents have left again,” he mentioned in a conciliatory tone. “So you can show

your face at home again.”

“Hallelujah,” I replied irritably and turned the music back on.

“What are you doing?” Jonah shouted.

The music stopped abruptly—he really pulled the plug.

It didn’t make any sense at all. Even though he was standing two steps away from me, I could smell his scent. His lips reminded me of our kiss, and then the images of the dirty fantasy I’d had of Noé blowing me came back. I sighed. “Why are you here?”

Jonah clenched his hand, further crumpling the already wrinkled paper. I could see that he was struggling not to get carried away by his feelings. Could it be that he hadn’t been so averse to the kiss two weeks ago? Because even though he tried to tell me with a grim look that he was serious, his body told me otherwise. He stood tensely in front of me in his black jogging bottoms and brown windbreaker but still appeared as if he wanted to throw his arms around my neck. His breath came irregularly, yet he stubbornly maintained eye contact. Then, he nervously licked his lips.

I slowly stepped closer to him until there were only a few inches between us. His hazel eyes sparkled in the light of the lamps like those of a frightened deer. “Maybe ... that’s why you’re here,” I said, stroking his neck tenderly with my knuckles.

“No!” he exclaimed, upset, as he slapped my hand away.

“Liar,” I whispered and kissed him.

As I suspected, he dropped his mask the first second our lips touched. Not that it was any different for me—there was something about Jonah that drove me crazy. Maybe

it was his smell, maybe it was his pretty face. His lips or those beautiful eyes. Probably everything.

His warmth flowed through me and dissolved all the muscle pain. All the blood pooled in my center, and like a drowning man, I soaked up as much of him as I could. I placed my hand on the back of his neck and slipped my tongue into his mouth. That tugging desire awoke in me again, that longing for more. My whole body ached for him. And Jonah also kissed more and more intensely. His initial hesitation was swept away, and he held my head with both hands and joined in the dance of our tongues.

I wrapped an arm around his body and snuggled up to him. Even though he stiffened slightly, he didn't let go of my head and almost devoured me. My cock was pushing against my pants, and when I felt Jonah's hard-on, I couldn't help but put my hand on the bulge in his pants. A sweet sigh escaped his lips, and he gave in.

But only briefly.

The next moment, he tore himself away from me and backed away, startled. Breathless, he stared at me. His whole body was screaming for more, but his mind was obviously fully functional again. He ran the back of his hand over his mouth and stared at me in horror.

“What ... am I doing here? This ... this isn't right!”

I was just as out of breath. My lips were trembling as if I was freezing cold, and yet this greed continued to pulse inside me. I wanted more. I needed more. I felt dizzy, the studio blurred beyond recognition for a moment. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to concentrate.

And suddenly, there was Phil in front of me.

My heart skipped a beat as he reached out for me. I miss you , were the bittersweet words that silently fell from his lips. I miss you, Lu. But then he pulled his hand back, pressed his fist to his chest, and hung his head sadly. The sight made my heart ache. My whole body trembled. I felt forces pressing on me from all sides, threatening to crush me. And then the guilt hit me like a tidal wave, and I struggled to hold back my tears.

“No!” Jonah said resolutely and Phil disappeared again.

I stared at him open-mouthed. Had I just seen a ghost? Before I knew it, Jonah was walking toward the door.

“Wait!” I grabbed him by the arm and wondered how I managed to get that word past my lips. But it was no use.

Jonah pulled his arm back and snapped at me. “Stop messing with my head!” He rushed out of the studio, the door closing behind him with a bang.

Who is confusing whom here? Bloody hell!

I tussled my hair. That was not good. Seeing Phil was an extremely bad sign. Completely confused, I finished the water bottle and lit a cigarette. My hands were shaking as I sat down on the couch and tried to take a deep breath.

My cell phone vibrated. The possibility that it could be bad news scared me so much that I just smoked my cigarette. After mustering up some courage, I checked the message. It was from Martin.

“Hey, my class tomorrow morning is canceled. Are we going to the gym?”

I hesitated because I just felt miserable. My common sense took over and I sent

Martin a confirmation. I couldn't allow it to pull the ground from under my feet again.

Maybe I should tell Martin that my brain is playing tricks on me. That I saw Phil. But then he'll want to know how that could have happened. Maybe it's better to keep it to myself. I'll go to the gym tomorrow and then have a break from all this.

I glanced at the painting lying on the floor, which I would probably have to work on for another two weeks. But just the thought of it was paralyzing. Yes, I definitely needed a break. Everyday life would do me good. I had slept through the two classes today, but I tried not to be so hard on myself., especially since I had worked for two weeks straight.

And what about Jonah? Damn it! He's so cute!

The things I did with him in my imagination ... But that was probably only because I saw Phil in him. This idea had become so ingrained in my head that I could obviously see him even when I was sober.

That has to stop. No more alcohol from now on.

I checked whether any important dates were coming up, but there was nothing apart from Marco's release concert in two weeks.

I can do that. It can't be that difficult not to drink alcohol for a while. And no more advances toward Jonah. I'll keep my distance from now on.

It was already dark outside, and I felt far too exhausted to drag myself home. But I really needed to eat something, so I went to the gas station and bought myself a yogurt and a bread roll.

The fresh air rejuvenated me, and I was already heading back to the studio when my cell phone buzzed. It was a message from Steven. “The course at Seeger’s on Friday has been canceled. But look where it’s going!”

Shortly afterward, he sent me a screenshot of an email that I hadn’t even seen yet. The task was to deliver sketches of bars and restaurants by Saturday morning.

There goes my resolution not to drink.

It was inevitable now, especially considering Steven’s prediction that it was going to be a pub crawl.

### Jonah

It was impossible to concentrate on the lecture. I had been feeling terribly uncomfortable in my skin all morning. Nothing felt right, whether I was observing the professor or gazing at the screen before me. The evening at Lucien's studio hung over me like a dark, demonic cloud.

I didn't even know how I actually felt. Was I exhilarated? Tired? Confused? Or maybe angry?

Lucien had me under his spell and I succumbed to him with the first little touch. He was a demon! And he looked like a damn angel!

It made me angry because he had been following me everywhere since I left the studio. He was constantly buzzing around in my mind like a ghost, and every time I licked my lips, I tasted him.

When Simon and I left the university at lunchtime and cigarette smoke wafted into my nostrils, I turned around. Maybe he was there—which made absolutely no sense.

"Have you seen anyone you know?" Simon asked.

"Hm ..." I said quietly. "No, I was wrong."



“You’re kind of out of sorts today. Are you okay?”

“I had a rough night’s sleep.”

“Must be the mid-semester slump. Soon it picks up and suddenly the year is over.”

“Yeah, I guess it will be,” I mumbled, my mind already back in the studio.

I kissed him. Of course, he kissed me first, but I kissed him. And I wanted more. And he would have given me more. Oh God, I’m so stupid!

Maybe Lucien was right. Maybe I really was a liar. Because if I had been honest with myself, I would have stopped fooling myself. Lucien awakened a desire in me and tickled someone who was a complete stranger to me. Just the thought of him kissing me made the blood rush to my center and my cock twitch.

I remembered how I had held him in the stairwell. His slim body ... And how I had placed my hands on his head during the last kiss. I felt the warmth of his body, the heat on his neck, and his sweet tongue. I hadn’t wanted him to stop.

Oh God! Stop it already! He’s a man! And I like women!

At least this time I did the right thing and left—albeit with quite a delay. But I had run away. That was good.

Shit, man! And yet I couldn’t let it go.

Not even a hot shower had helped. Afterward, I lay in bed, clutching the pillow and staring at the wall. When I realized that Lucien’s room was behind it, I turned to the other side and crawled under the covers. My thoughts were so scattered that I couldn’t even recall a comforting psalm. Instead, my hand had wandered into my

pants while I thought of Lucien.

“Oh, we’re having curry today,” Simon happily said as we reached the canteen.

I wasn’t hungry at all and went to the salad buffet instead.

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The day was more challenging than rewarding, so I felt relieved when I finally made it home in the evening.

“Saturday in a week works for me,” Martin said in the kitchen. “I’ll take my cousin with me. Ah, I thought you might be able to use them.”

It sounded like he was on the phone, but when I stepped into the kitchen, I found Lucien sitting there. He was smoking and looking at a pile of new magazines spread out on the table in front of him.

“Jonah!” Martin exclaimed happily. “Your birthday is coming up next week on Saturday. We’ll celebrate it!”

“Oh ... I actually wanted to ...”

“Nothing there!” he interrupted me. “You’ll be twenty-one! You can’t mope about it!”

I hesitated, placing my backpack on the table and casting a cautious glance at Lucien. He looked different somehow. His wheat-colored hair was shiny. He was freshly shaven and well-rested. His green eyes sparkled mischievously.

God! He was even more beautiful than I remembered. That damn angel.

When he peered up at me and blew out smoke, all my blood sank into my legs, my heart slipped into my pants, and my alarm bells went off. Had he told Martin something? Lu acted as if nothing had happened the night before. As if I had never even been in the studio. He didn't ignore me completely, but he extinguished the cigarette with a bit too much indifference for my liking. He then put the magazines in a pile and stood up. As he walked around the table, I saw something flicker in his eyes that aggravated me—apart from anything else that completely confused me. There was this brief moment when Lucien locked eyes with me, a hint of divine spark in his gaze, as if he were genuinely pleased to see me. A smile even crossed his closed lips. But the moment didn't last a second and was nothing more than a muscle twitch. He avoided any further eye contact and disappeared into his room. I sat down at the table and was even more confused than before.

“Let's go to the thrift shop on Friday afternoon,” Martin said and sat down at the table with a glass of water.

The thrift shop again?

But before I could roll my eyes, Martin raised his hands in a placating gesture. “I just want to have a look around. We could also use some new glasses, and maybe you can find some too.”

“I have a lecture until three o'clock.”

“Then we'll go afterward. It's not far from here.”

“All right, it won't hurt to have a look around.”

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Everyday life returned incredibly quickly, and we had dinner together again the very

next day. Martin didn't seem to notice what had happened between Lucien and me, or maybe he was just a master of deception. And Lucien acted as distant toward me as he had when I first moved in, even if his looks made me understand that he was actually just trying to do me a favor. It was as if we were pretending a normality to Martin that didn't exist. And since I never found Lucien alone, which was what he probably intended, I had no opportunity to confront him.

I thought about the situation, examined it from all angles, and tried to figure out how best to proceed. Every encounter with Lucien seemed to awaken something unknown in me. I even actively avoided eye contact with him during dinner together. I had never felt so ashamed before. Even if the opportunity had arisen to confront Lucien, I likely wouldn't have done so anyway. I was enjoying the peace too much to want to destroy it.

Before I knew it, it was already Friday, and I met Martin at the thrift shop. Of course, he was hoping that I would finally find some furniture for my room, but I aimlessly roamed through the aisles, feigning interest in finding a table. In a raffia basket, I stumbled upon a few wall crosses, and I leaned over to inspect one.

Hang Jesus on the wall for all I care.

I hesitated. At my parents' house, Jesus hung in every room watching you. I wanted to avoid that here, so I put the cross back.

"Did you find anything?" Martin asked as I stepped next to him at the checkout.

The cashier was wrapping a framed picture of Miles Davis in newspaper. As she turned to the three glasses he had bought, I stepped closer to Martin. "Is Lu gay?" I asked quietly, surprised at how easily the question came to my lips.

Martin grinned and took out his money.

What's there to laugh about?

"I don't think it matters to him."

"What do you mean?"

Martin put the money on the table and regarded me suspiciously. "What do you care about Lu's sex life? What makes you think that all of a sudden?"

"What do you mean it doesn't matter?" I asked.

"Well ... God doesn't make a difference either. He loves everyone equally."

"That's not the same thing," I said indignantly.

Martin laughed, took the bag with the glasses and his picture, and left.

It didn't really matter to me whether Lucien liked men, women, or both. I couldn't explain to myself why I had asked Martin. Lu had kissed me, so it was evident that he liked men. Maybe I just didn't want to admit it. But what would it have changed if Martin had assured me that Lu only liked women? Could I have dismissed it as an oversight? Two terrible blunders. Slips that ignited a desire I had never experienced before in my life.

This can't go on. Time to look for women. A girlfriend will do me good.

In the end, I was glad that Martin dropped the conversation. We went home and prepared dinner.

"I've been thinking about going to work," I said as I sliced the zucchini.

“As long as your parents are paying, you don’t really need a job.”

“Not a job,” I replied eagerly. “Something charitable. At church or something. And maybe I’ll meet some new people there.”

Women.

“At the hospital, they’re always looking for students to do sitting service. That way you can earn some extra money and do something charitable.”

“Hm ...” I mumbled, unconvinced. “Yeah, maybe.”

The front door suddenly slammed shut.

“Fucking door ...” Lucien muttered and staggered past the kitchen, completely drunk.

“Lu!” Martin shouted. “Are you eating with us?”

“No,” he answered dejectedly and let the door close behind him.

“What’s wrong with him?” I asked. “One day he’s fine and the next he’s completely off track again.”

“That’s just how he is—a bit moody.” The smile had disappeared from Martin’s face, and he was staring at the knife in his hand.

I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was very wrong here.

“Don’t worry about it,” Martin replied to my unspoken question. “It’s nothing to do with you.”

How would you know that?

I stared worriedly at Lucien's door.

My goodness! Why did I even care about him? And why did it bother me that I worry about him? He's rarely home. In fact, I don't even know him. It's probably all just a misunderstanding.

Lucien

Aside from the night with Steven, where we got completely wasted, I managed to get through the next few days without any major incidents. I felt a bit bad about giving Jonah and Martin the cold shoulder on Friday, but it had been to everyone's benefit that I hadn't sat down with them. Who knows what would have slipped out when I was drunk. I had also resolved not to push Jonah any further.

I couldn't get the way he looked at me when we had dinner together last Thursday. On one hand, there was almost a sense of panic, as if he feared I might reveal our secret to someone. Yet, there was also a glimmer in his eyes, as if he silently pleaded for my attention. And when he lowered his head, there had been disappointment, probably because I had ignored him.

It wasn't as if that had been easy for me. Jonah exerted an attraction on me that I found hard to resist. His eyes attracted me like magnets, and as distant as he was, his whole body radiated a warmth that I couldn't resist. I longed to talk to him, even if it meant talking all night long. It deeply bothered me that we barely had a meaningful conversation yet. But even if we had managed to pull ourselves together after the disaster I had caused, and even if Jonah had been gay—which I didn't doubt—he wouldn't have allowed it. His faith was the only thing standing in his way. But I was definitely not in a position to tell him that.



Before I drove myself crazy with the confusion of thoughts, I made an effort to refocus on my studies. The preparations for the exhibition had taken up more time than I had expected, so I had to postpone some of my work.

Fortunately, I had understanding lecturers who allowed me to submit assignments later. And because I didn't want to get lost in the studio again, I worked at home in my room and enjoyed the peace and quiet of having the apartment to myself.

So a quiet week passed, and I was able to concentrate on what was important again. It wasn't as if my thoughts weren't revolving around Jonah or Phil, but working on sketches and charcoal drawings was enough to keep me on track.

On Friday morning, I moved my workstation to the kitchen for a cup of coffee, where I was still sitting. Just before twelve o'clock, I heard someone arriving home, although neither of my two roommates was expected to be back at this hour. The door closed, and shortly afterward, Jonah appeared in the kitchen.

We stared at each other motionlessly for a moment. He was probably just as surprised to see me as I was to see him.

"Hello!" he said, placing the bag on one of the chairs.

I immediately bundled the sketches lying around into a pile and placed them on the magazines.

"I forgot something," he said, disappearing into his room. A moment later he came back and stowed a book in his bag. "So I thought I might as well eat here. Are you joining me?" He stood at the fridge, looking at me with a smile so sweet it warmed my heart.

If he can be normal, so can I.

“Um ... yes, I could eat something.”

Stay cool!

“My cooking skills are modest,” Jonah explained and stroked his hair mischievously.  
“But how about ... an omelet?”

“That sounds good. Do you want me to help you with anything?”

“You can set the table,” he said and retrieved eggs, ham, and tomatoes out of the fridge.

He seemed so sure of himself. I didn't know him like that. And I hadn't known he could cook either.

“I'll return the favor as soon as I master an edible dish,” I said and grabbed two plates from the cupboard. When I turned around, Jonah suddenly stood in front of me. He immediately took a step back and raised his hands.

“Oh ... I'm sorry. I just wanted to get a bowl.” He let me pass and went to the closet. I leaned back in my seat so as not to be in his way.

“Don't you ever cook?” he asked, returning to the kitchen counter.

Watching him crack the eggs was proof enough that this was by no means his first time cooking. He cracked them almost casually with one hand, and as he swung the whisk, I realized it wasn't his cooking skills that were modest, but him.

“I'm not that ...” I tried to pick up the conversation again.

What was he asking again?

“I’m not that demanding when it comes to food.”

“Oh, okay, then I’m glad.”

I laughed. The fact that he also tried to maintain normality between us reassured me. Of course, we would have to talk about what had happened at some point, but not today. I was also glad that he was the one cooking. Even though I couldn’t stop myself from looking at Jonah all the time, and he would surely notice sooner or later, at least I wasn’t making a fool of myself in the kitchen. While he poured the egg mixture into two different pans, I got cutlery and filled two glasses with water on the table. I found some leftover bread in the bread bin, which I cut into slices and put in a basket on the table. Jonah retreated with two plates and placed my omelet in front of me, which couldn’t have looked more professional. He had even found some parsley and sprinkled it on top.

“It looks like something you’d find in a fancy restaurant.”

Jonah laughed and put some pepper and salt on the table. “I doubt that.” He glanced at me and raised his eyebrows. “Have you ever been to a fancy restaurant?”

I would have liked to respond more than once , but the truth hurt too much, so I simply grimaced. “Thank you for the food.”

“Bon appétit!” he said and got started without further ado.

There’s probably no time for a prayer, I thought with a quick glance at the clock. It all seemed totally surreal to me. Not even the silence at the table felt uncomfortable but somehow familiar. Trying not to show my irritation or growing joy, I ate the delicious omelet.

“What are you working on right now?” Jonah asked out of the blue.

I followed his gaze to my sketches. "I'm working on a term paper."

"And what's the assignment?"

I regarded him with a hint of suspicion. So far, he hadn't shown much interest in my art. Or at least he hadn't shown it to me. In fact, Martin was the reason why he had been at the last two openings. "It ... is supposed to be a critical examination of migration."

"And how are you getting on?"

I stopped with my fork halfway to my mouth and frowned.

"If I remember correctly, you tend to deal with other topics in your work."

"Yes ... it ... is progressing. I have a few ideas. But you're right. That's not my subject at all."

We looked at each other seriously for a moment and then laughed before returning to our food. I slowly thawed a little. "Tomorrow is your birthday. November 12th. Twenty-one is something special. Are you looking forward to the concert?"

"Yes, as special as I am," Jonah joked. "When is your birthday?"

"July 1st. But it means nothing to me."

"Still a nice date. There's a much better chance you'll be able to celebrate outside."

I picked a few tomatoes from the omelet and pushed them to the edge of the plate. When I realized he was watching me, I grimaced and smiled crookedly. "I'm sorry. A few too many tomatoes for me."

“No problem.” He laughed again. “Now that I see it, I remember. You also picked out the big chunks in the spaghetti sauce. I guess everyone has their quirks.”

“Is there anything I absolutely mustn’t include in my revenge menu?”

“Eggplant. Absolutely not.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem. I can’t stand them either.”

Sometime later, when Jonah shifted back and forth in his chair and took his first nervous glance at the clock on the wall, I was surprised at how quickly lunchtime had passed. We had actually lost ourselves in conversation and were still sitting in front of our empty plates.

“Don’t you have a class this afternoon?”

“No, Seeger’s drawing class is canceled again—and I’ve already finished the drawings for it.”

“I’d really love to chat more, but unfortunately, I have to go to class.” He finished his glass and made a move to clear away his plate.

“Just leave it. I’ll clean up.”

“Thanks.” The way he looked at me was thanks enough. And before I knew it, he was hurrying out of the apartment. I stood there a little lost for a moment, listening to the thumping noise from the stairwell. A smile flitted across my face, and I had to admit that it had gone better than expected. It was actually fun to have lunch with Jonah, and I learned things about him that made me smile. Like how he hated eggplants, for example. And he made great omelets.

Just like Phil ...

My mind must have momentarily shut down because when I snapped back to reality, I found myself standing in front of the sink, fixated on the wall. A sense of dizziness washed over me, accompanied by a deep exhale. The stack of dirty dishes lay before me, and as I reached for the dish soap, I noticed my trembling hands. Disregarding it, I started washing the first plate.

But my vision blurred and pain throbbed behind my forehead. I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to concentrate.

Breathe, damn it ... in ... out ...

It didn't help. Suddenly, my hands were covered in blood. They shone a dark red, as if they were gloves.

“Woah!” Gasping in shock, I dropped the plate and recoiled.

For a brief moment, I found myself in the darkness, trapped, blinded by bright light, my bloody hands pressed to bare skin. Loud breathing. A groan.

And I was back in the kitchen, my hands full of white foam. My whole body was shaking.

Bloody hell!

Another attempt to do the dishes failed. A storm was raging in my head. I dried my hands and lit a cigarette. The shaking just wouldn't stop. My heart was racing as if I had just run a sprint. The familiar darkness spread within me, and as if a single small thought had opened a door, the demons within me rose again and tormented me from all sides.

What kind of fucking hypocrite are you?

How had I let myself be tempted to spend lunchtime with Jonah? I should have vanished! The more time I spent with him, the more confused I became.

And then he cooked for us too! Just like Phil!

I had made a mistake. Jonah was like an angel; I wasn't worthy of him at all. I'd proved enough in the last year and a half that I was scum.

I paced back and forth in the kitchen like a tiger in a cage, nervously dragging on my cigarette. But even inhaling deeply didn't help me calm down. So I headed for the fridge and took out a cold beer.

Come on, get a grip! It's probably just this damn anniversary. It has nothing to do with Jonah. We just had spent a peaceful lunch and he wouldn't stayed and certainly wouldn't have smiled at me like that if he loathed me.

But all the persuasion was in vain. Over the next few hours, my day darkened more and more. My thoughts were racing, and a terrible storm was raging inside me. The very possibility that Jonah might like me seemed so far-fetched that I tried to find comfort in the theory that it would be best for him to have nothing to do with me anymore. But how was I supposed to get through all this without him? Now that he had left the apartment, I felt emptier than before. He had acted as a counterbalance to me and had kept me sane, and now that he was gone, I was drifting further and further into darkness. But there was one good thing about the abyss: They awakened my inspiration. And so, between beers and cigarettes, like a man possessed, I put ideas on paper that I later wanted to put on canvas in the studio.

In my delirium, I didn't even notice how time was passing, and my cigarette almost fell out of the corner of my mouth when Jonah returned to the kitchen. With wide

eyes, he scanned his surroundings. My sketches were scattered everywhere—on the chairs, the sideboard, and even on the stove. Three empty beer bottles were on the table, and the ashtray was full to the brim.

His presence snapped me out of the spiral I was trapped in, and I realized how far I had fallen in the three hours of his absence. Jonah opened the window, let in some fresh air, and turned to me. His look spoke volumes. He watched me, stunned, as if I were no longer the same person he'd had lunch with. Admittedly, I wasn't. He had already tried to say something twice but obviously didn't have the words.

I froze, and my breath hitched. I would rather be anywhere than here. It was impossible for me to continue where we left off at lunchtime.

I gathered my sketches and shoved them into the folder, packed up my cigarettes and lighter, went into my room to get my coat, and fled the apartment ... or rather, from Jonah.



Jonah

I had never felt more out of place in my life. It wasn't the leather jackets, studded belts, or the many tattoos that made me feel this way. It was my white sweater and brown tweed trousers that seemed entirely out of sync. I definitely didn't belong in this place. We hadn't even entered the club yet, but I was secretly hoping to be turned away at the entrance. However, the girl stamped my hand and winked at me. Martin pushed me through the dimly lit corridor into the basement. Smoke hung thickly in the air, music blared from speakers scattered around the space, and the band hadn't even started playing yet.

"You remember Marco," Martin said, stuffing my jacket into a corner with his.

I wasn't sure and shook my head.

"The tall guy who looks like a wrestler plays the bass. They're celebrating the release of their second album today."

We grabbed a few beers at the bar and entered the vaulted cellar where the concert would take place. Surprisingly, the atmosphere was relaxed and casual. Despite a few irritated glances, no one seemed to mind my presence.

We had stopped right next to the doorway when Martin waved to someone at the bar.

Steven, who seemed stoned as usual, waved back and then tugged on Lu's coat. Lu stood with his back to us, putting his wallet away and handing Steven a beer. When he made a move to come over to us, Lu hesitated. He was in no hurry to follow Steven at all. His eyes darted in all directions, as if he were desperately looking for a reason to deviate from the path.

"Guys!" Steven shouted, clinking his plastic cup against mine so hard that my beer spilled over and ran down my hand. "What's up? Happy birthday!"

Lucien stopped between Martin and Steven and congratulated me with a forced smile while toasting me from a safe distance. Surprisingly, I was grateful for his restraint; I couldn't imagine how I would have reacted if he had hugged me to congratulate me.

He was insecure and didn't know how to behave toward me. His moods changed like the weather. First, he'd been away for two weeks, and after I'd shown up at the studio, he started hanging around at home again and seemed quite normal, except for last night. After we'd had lunch together, he seemed balanced and content. But three hours later, he became a completely different person and completely out of it. As quickly as he packed his things, he fled from me.

And now he was standing here, forcing a smile for me. I just couldn't figure him out.

"Dude," Steven said, tugging on Lucien's sleeve again. "Give me a cigarette."

Lucien handed one to him, and Steven licked the cigarette, extinguishing the tobacco and making his way toward the exit. He would probably roll the joint outside first.

"I'll be right back," Martin said and disappeared too.

Great ... that's not part of the plan. I looked at Lucien with a puzzled expression.

“Have you ever been to a concert before?” he asked.

I frowned, surprised that he was the one trying to avoid an awkward silence, at least until I noticed the half-empty cup in his hand. He’s pounding it back very fast.

Is he nervous and trying to pick up where we left off yesterday lunchtime?

“No,” I replied. “At least not on one of those.”

“Well, let’s make it all the more fun then,” he said, patting me on the back. He managed to break the ice at least a little.

But it was only when Martin returned that I felt like a whole rock had been lifted from my shoulders. When Steven was back, I breathed a sigh of relief, because it made it easier for me not to stare at Lucien the whole time.

“Do you like rock music?” Steven asked me.

“I ... um ... I honestly don’t know,” I replied and looked to Lucien for the answer. What he listens to in the studio ... isn’t that rock? Or metal? I had no idea. But Lucien had gone to the mixing desk unnoticed and was talking to the sound engineer.

“You’ve already met Marco. He’s the bass player,” Steven told me. “But they’ve got a new singer. His name is Noé or something. He’s definitely got an awesome voice.”

“Martin said this was a ... release concert?”

“Yes, they re-recorded the vocal track with Noé. It was really worth it. Lu and I were at the warm-up concert in the rehearsal room. The guy’s got it.”

I just nodded, as I had no idea what that meant. Even if the guy was as good as

Steven said, I had no comparison anyway. While I listened to Steven, Martin chatted with two girls and eventually led them over to us. Steven disappeared back outside, and I found myself next to the cute blonde. She was shorter than me and looked at me with adorable doe eyes.

I attempted to conceal it, but I felt somewhat overwhelmed by all the new impressions.

“Lu!” someone called out. It was Jessica, running toward him in black high heels and throwing herself at him.

Lucien stood motionless and didn’t even put his arms around her in greeting. But Jessica didn’t let that deter her. She put on her pretty smile and nudged him teasingly. I felt a little sorry for her. Even I could see that Lucien wasn’t interested in her. She tried hard to get his attention, but he didn’t appreciate it at all. Instead, he let his gaze wander around the room. Before our eyes met, I turned back to Martin and the two women.

The lights went out, and the distorted sound of an electric guitar resonated from the speakers. At the same time, all the spotlights turned to the stage and a slim singer with long brown hair and tattooed arms leaped in front of the microphone. Marco and three other musicians stood behind him. The band started like a thunderstorm—loud and fast and the audience jumped along from the first note.

“Come on!” Lucien shouted and grabbed my arm. “Let’s party!”

“Wait!” I shouted, startled, but it was already too late.

He dragged me into the crowd, leaving me with no choice but to jump up and down with him. Together, we bounced to the beat and held on to each other so that no one could fall over. Even before the second song came on, I was so carried away by the

dynamic and joy that I didn't want to stop. The exuberant atmosphere was like a release, and the thick air gave me more energy than the fresh mountain air at home ever had.

When the band exited the stage after the concert, I found myself drenched in sweat, sporting a few bruises, and filled with overwhelming joy.

Together with the two girls, we moved to the next bar and continued the party there. The blonde with the doe eyes—Daniela—sat next to me on the bench and talked about her German studies. She wasn't stingy with her touches and moved closer to me. The attention she gave me made it impossible to keep the grin off my face. I was completely absorbed by her.

When I noticed Lucien slipping into his coat and putting on his scarf out of the corner of my eye, I was able to turn away for a moment. Martin stood next to him, nodded, and patted him on the shoulder to say goodbye.

"Where's he going?" I asked once Lu left the bar.

"He's leaving," Martin replied and finished his glass.

"Just like that? Without saying goodbye?"

"That's just Lu," he explained dryly.

Lucien obviously didn't think it was necessary to say goodbye to me, and I didn't know whether I was offended or disappointed. Daniela rested her hand on my thigh and leaned in close to my ear. "Do you have a girlfriend?"

My heart jumped unexpectedly, and I shook my head.

“You could come to my place. I live just around the corner.”

This is it. My first chance to get a girlfriend.

The fact that I had no experience at all made me incredibly nervous. On the other hand, I was well aware that this was about to change and I grinned openly at Daniela.

“Enjoy it,” Martin said with a mischievous smile as I said goodbye.

As promising as the night had begun, it ended in disaster. After Daniela tried several times and in different ways to make my penis hard, I became so sick that I rushed to the toilet and vomited. While I leaned over the bowl, my thoughts turned to Lucien. To shake him off, I went back to Daniela and we tried again. But it was pointless.

“It’s not that bad. You just drank too much,” she said sympathetically.

I wanted to sink into the ground in shame because I wasn’t even in the condition to go home at that moment. At least it was easy for me to fall asleep.

When I said goodbye to Daniela on Sunday, she took my cell phone and typed in her number with a smile. “Maybe another time.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I mumbled ashamedly.

“But I’d love to see you again,” she said, sounding completely sincere. “So, call me!”

I went home with my head hanging low.

Jonah

“How did it go?” Martin asked with a broad grin as I entered the kitchen.

I turned bright red. I knew for sure that it wasn’t the alcohol. It had been the hand of God. It had saved me from making a big mistake. As punishment for venturing so far, I was humiliated that same night with the most embarrassing moment of my life.

“Oh dear, that bad?” He laughed. “Do you at least have her number?”

All I could manage was an embarrassed nod.

“Well, it’s all good then. Don’t worry about it.”

“I should go to confession.”

Martin patted me on the shoulder with enthusiasm. “One day you’ll laugh about it.”

“Please, don’t tell Lu about it.”

“About what? That it didn’t go as you’d hoped? That’s not so bad.”

“Still,” I mumbled, retreating to my room like a beaten dog.

I tried unsuccessfully to devote myself to my studies, but the day passed without me achieving anything worthwhile.

And when I finally lay in bed, the carousel of thoughts got going. I spent half the night awake, pondering over what had happened. It wasn't until the early morning that I realized I hadn't been guilty of anything with Daniela—only my behavior had been dishonorable, and I felt ashamed of that.

You're taking yourself way too seriously.

After hours of brooding, I finally found the sleep I longed for. When I woke up on Monday afternoon, I felt better. The alcohol had worn off, and my head no longer felt like a ticking time bomb. I was even looking forward to going to university and seeing Simon again.

"I missed you at church," he said when we met up between lectures. "Where were you?"

"I was celebrating my birthday," I explained. "I'm sorry. I thought I could get around it, but they just dragged me along. I would have called you otherwise."

"No problem. I was out of town on Saturday night anyway. But happy birthday."

"Thank you."

"And overslept again this morning?" he remarked anxiously. "Is your crazy roommate giving you sleepless nights?"

"No ... why would he?" I replied and kept walking.

My shock subsided over the course of the week and the thought of calling Daniela no



longer seemed so far-fetched. When I got home on Thursday, I was determined to get in touch with her. A single failure shouldn't discourage me.

I told myself, "Only those who dare win," and went into the kitchen with renewed confidence to get something to drink. To my surprise, Lucien was sitting at the kitchen table, his forehead resting on one hand, smoking. The beer and ashtray were right in front of him, while the magazines were on the other side of the table.

"What are you doing?" I asked, grabbing some juice from the fridge.

Only then did he look up, stub out his cigarette, and stroke his face. But he didn't give me an answer.

"You left on Saturday without saying goodbye," I said with my back to him as I filled my glass. "Where were you?"

A chair scraped across the floor behind me. Lu was probably in one of his dark moods again when he ignored me and disappeared into his room without a word. But he put his arms around me from behind and held me tight.

"Lu!" I said, startled, and put the juice down. I stayed like that for a while, hoping he would let go again.

But the opposite happened. He even snuggled up to me. I could feel his warm body and his pelvis pressing against my buttocks. He slowly ran his hand up over my chest and placed it against my throat. Then he kissed me tenderly below the ear. Hearing his breath so close to me sent a shiver through my body and awakened a desire in me.

Startled by this, I pulled away from him and turned around. His dark green eyes gleamed as he looked at me with bated breath. This would have been my chance to leave, but I couldn't tear my gaze away from him. Time seemed to stand still for a

moment, and my heart pounded loudly in my chest, taking my breath away.

We stood face to face at eye level. His honey-blond hair was disheveled; he was somehow pale and seemed overtired, but his eyes gleamed with passionate intensity. I could do nothing but look at him and wonder how long the sight of him had had such an effect on me. He tenderly caressed my neck, placed his hand gently on my nape, and kissed me deeply.

All my worries melted away and I surrendered to a world that seemed to move in slow motion. My body felt warm and light, almost weightless, and I put my hands on his hips. I wanted to feel his waist, like that time in the stairwell. When I felt his tongue in my mouth, I thrust mine toward him. He tasted of beer and cigarettes, but I didn't mind. I couldn't get enough of him. Everything felt so light.

I closed my eyes and surrendered.

Lucien pressed himself against me, and his warmth heated me up even more. The blood pooled in my middle and made my pants tighter and tighter. It was only when I felt his hardness against mine that I came back to my senses. Shit! And yet, a short moan escaped me. I quickly grabbed his head with both hands and pushed him off me.

It couldn't be. No! It can't be!

Before I knew it, Lucien sank to his knees, unzipped my pants, and pulled them down along with my boxer briefs.

“What ...”

“You'll like it,” he said curtly and took my member in his mouth.

Holy ... ahhh ...

I didn't know what hit me. There was this overwhelming feeling, with my heartbeat pumping more blood to my core. It took me a few seconds to realize what exactly Lucien was doing. When my brain finally realized what was happening, it wasn't just my cock that stiffened, but my whole body. Stunned, I clung to the kitchen counter behind me.

Lucien moved his head back. "Don't worry," he whispered and massaged my stiff member. "Relax and enjoy it."

Just seeing him on his knees in front of me excited me, but when he opened his mouth again and took me inside him, I gasped and covered my mouth with one hand.

Lucien circled my tip with his tongue and massaged my testicles at the same time. He caressed my shaft, licked the seam devotedly, and then he put both hands on my hips and took me so deep inside him that I thought I could feel his uvula.

He stretched his neck and made a soft choking sound, but that didn't stop him from continuing. The warmth enveloping me, the moisture, the tightness in his mouth—it was driving me crazy. My cock pulsated and I felt dizzy. With my heart racing, I stared at his honey-blond hair the whole time, watching his head move back and forth in my lap.

When he looked up at me with a greedy gaze, I was suddenly overwhelmed by feelings I had never experienced before. Lu simply blew my mind, and I couldn't tear myself away from his dark green eyes or his mouth.

He should keep going.

Never stop.

And he kept going—full of devotion and affection. Sucking me into him and driving me further and further away from my convictions. I gasped louder and louder, biting my lower lip, but it was no use. The noises I was making were so full of lust and desire that my own noises threatened to pull the rug out from under me.

Finally, I grabbed hold of Lucien's head, clutched his hair tightly, and followed his movements with my hands. Overwhelmed, I threw my head back and gradually lost my breath. My eyes kept closing, and I was on the verge of cumming. But Lucien skillfully delayed it several times by pulling out in time. He obviously enjoyed torturing me.

When I looked down at him again, he was licking his lips and rubbing my cock. "Fuck my mouth." His words were barely a whisper, but his eyes made it clear to me that he was serious.

I gaped at him as if paralyzed.

What kind of game is this?

My mind had long since given up, and the tugging in my core only wanted one thing. I still clung to his head and was relieved when he took me in again. But this time, he moved back and forth more slowly, setting my lust on fire.

I moved my pelvis, slowly and carefully at first, but then faster and faster. Completely overwhelmed by the burning desire to sink myself deep inside him, I was dominated only by lust. I lost my temper, thrusting faster and harder as I held his head and moaned louder and louder.

Lu took me all the way inside him every time. I couldn't help but notice that he was now touching himself and making rapturous noises along with gurgling—a deep hum that spread through my body via my cock.

And then I felt it. The orgasm rolled in like a wave and there was absolutely nothing I could do to stop it. I moaned, clawed even harder into Lucien's hair, and poured myself deep down his throat. My whole body tensed up, my muscles twitched uncontrollably, and my knees became so weak that I could only stay on my feet with his help.

I shot straight into his mouth, and he held my pelvis with one hand while he brought himself to climax with the other. I was bent over him, struggling for breath, and could only guess from the twitching of his body that he had also come.

He released my penis with a smacking sound. As quickly as he had unzipped my pants, he zipped up his again. He knelt in front of me for a moment with his head bowed and took a shaky breath. I held onto the kitchen counter again, unable to believe I had just clung to him.

"Did I ... hurt you?" I asked in a shaky voice. I had no idea where that came from. I couldn't even explain what had just come over me, but the possibility that I could have hurt Lucien ...

Oh damn ... What just happened? I felt dizzy and gasped for breath.

Lucien squeezed his eyes shut, turned his head away and struggled back to his feet. He stood there for a moment with his lips pressed together and his face contorted. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. Then he just left me standing there and disappeared into his room.

I stood there completely confused and tried to organize my thoughts. I pulled my pants back up and looked around the kitchen. The glass with the juice was still where I had left it—so clean and untouched.

I heard Lucien's door open again. He hurried past the kitchen while putting on his

coat and left the apartment without a word or even a glance. The sound of the door closing sounded final, and I felt cold. My whole body was shaking and I couldn't think straight. What had just happened had felt devilishly good. The pleasant feeling was still coursing through my whole body and I anxiously ran my fingers through my hair. I returned to my room on unsteady legs—I left the juice behind.

When I finally lay in bed, I could still feel Lucien's warmth. I couldn't get the image of him kneeling in front of me out of my head, the look on his face as he glanced up at me. The feeling he had given me had been incredible. And the whole time I kept asking myself: Why not Daniela? Why him?

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Lucien

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

What have I done?

What if Martin finds out?

This cannot happen! No way!

Not even the cool air brought clarity. My mind was racing, and I was completely out of it and running aimlessly down the street like a madman. I could still feel Jonah's member in my mouth, tasted him and his semen ... and saw Phil in my mind's eye.

My brain had been going crazy all day. Phil had been buzzing around in my head like a bumblebee. When Jonah had been standing at the kitchen counter with his back to me, with his broad shoulders and well-proportioned upper body, I had seen Phil. My body had acted on its own. The longing to hold him, to feel him, to smell him, to absorb his warmth inside me ... I was drawn to him as if he were a magnet, irresistibly captivated by everything he embodied.

Shit, man!

How many times had I blown Phil just because I felt like it? Because we felt like it. Besides, I had always had the feeling that Phil had given me much more than I had given him. Secretly, I had hoped to give him something back, to make him happy.

I nervously lit a cigarette. My hands were shaking.

This is not good. Not good at all.

I urgently needed to distract myself, as the spiral I was trapped in kept dragging me further and further down. I felt myself being drawn into the depths of darkness and in danger of slowly drowning—a feeling I was all too familiar with. Martin had told me to tell him as soon as I realized it was happening again.

No. Not a chance.

Once more, I found myself crossing a line and breaking a promise I had made. I would never reach out to him for help—I simply didn't deserve it. Why couldn't he see that I was the biggest failure in the world? I was a master at fucking up everything. I didn't even stop at his cousin. Soiled a pure mind like Jonah's with my filth. And even now, I longed for him. Everything about him attracted me, as if he were the counterpart I'd lost a long time ago. I just couldn't resist him. It reminded me of my experience with Phil—except that Phil wasn't a believer and let that hinder his development. Jonah would never admit to himself that he liked men.

Never!

So I did well to get him out of my head as quickly as possible.

But how?

I must put an end to this once and for all! I cannot allow myself to be near him again.



These feelings aren't genuine anyway; I'm merely confusing them!

Even though I had just come, I still hadn't had enough. The urge in my pants was so strong that I paused and took a deep breath to compose myself.

God, Jonah is hot!

Stop it now!

Gradually regaining my composure, I found myself near a bus stop. I tried to keep a cool head because after all, it was actually quite simple: I was horny and hadn't fucked in a long time. I'd also been working far too much recently, so it was only normal to look for relief. Jonah could be glad that I hadn't really gone down on him straight away. The man was just hot and he didn't even know it. He was so innocent and pure. It was probably even good for him that I showed him this side of life. Maybe it brought him out of his shell a little.

Don't kid yourself.

I tried to make myself feel better, even though I knew I was dragging Jonah into the darkness with me. And he didn't deserve that. Oh yeah, I was just a selfish asshole. Most of the people I surrounded myself with knew that, and they didn't seem to care. Otherwise, they would have turned their backs on me long ago. No matter how messed up I was, I didn't want their pity, and they knew that.

But what was I supposed to do now?

For better or worse, I had to admit to myself that I wanted to see Jonah. But with this thought, Phil also appeared before my inner eye. I wiped my face and tried to think of something else. There was still a longing pulsing inside me that needed to be satisfied somehow. Maybe that was the key to distracting myself from other things.

Before I grabbed the phone out of my pocket, I felt it vibrate against my leg. An uneasy feeling welled up inside me.

Martin? Or maybe Jonah?

I glanced at the screen and was relieved.

Clarissa.

Her message arrived exactly when I needed it. It had been a long time since we had spent time together. In many ways, she mirrored my approach—averse to commitment and skeptical of love—and yet whenever she needed it, just like this time, she called me.

She texted, “Fancy a bit of fun? ;—)”

“Right away. Where do we meet?”

“Can’t meet at home,” she replied, which probably meant that her parents were there.

“I’ll book at Widder. In an hour?”

“Okay.” And so I took a long walk toward the old town.

Clarissa was one of those rich kids who spent her money on anything and everything and wasn't afraid to book a night at the fancy Widder Hotel just to have some fun. She was very different from her brother because Steven wasn't interested in luxury at all—apart from the fancy clothes he always wore. He didn't care that I fucked his sister every now and then—I was just one of many.

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“You’re somehow different than usual,” Clarissa said, tying her long brown curls into a big bun.

Like the Little Mermaid of Copenhagen, she sat in front of me and stared at my naked body with pleasure.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Somehow you’ve changed.”

I snorted derisively, leaned over the edge of the bed, reached for my pants on the floor, and pulled my cigarettes out of my back pocket. When I lit one, Clarissa immediately yanked it out of my mouth and dropped it in the water glass on the bedside table.

“This is a non-smoking room,” she calmly said. “I’m not paying your fines.”

“As if the few francs mattered.”

“I like spending money, yes. But I don’t burn it.”

“It’s not your money anyway.”

Clarissa let out an exasperated sigh. “Let’s change the subject. It’s impossible to talk about it with you anyway.”

“You see. I’m completely normal.”

“No,” she objected and stood up. As she went to the table and refilled her glass of champagne, the topknot came undone again. The curls cascaded down, draping her slender upper body like a veil. When she faced me, her long hair concealed her

breasts.

Like a nymph ...

I liked how much importance Clarissa attached to her appearance. She wasn't conceited and didn't think much of surgery, but she was meticulous about her diet and exercised a lot—a little too much, in my opinion. She sipped her glass and settled onto the bed beside me.

“What no?” I asked.

She was a master at not voicing thoughts as if the rest of the world could read minds. “You’ve changed, Lu.”

“And what do you mean by that?” I asked, bored. I lay stretched out next to her, with my arms crossed behind my head and one leg over the other.

“The way you fucked me.”

“Ha!” I laughed out loud. “Well, in that case.”

“Here,” she said, handing me the still almost full champagne glass. “I’d rather save myself those 100 calories.”

I took the glass and drank it down in two gulps.

“You know I like it when you do me really hard,” she continued, tossing her hair over her shoulders. “But today you were so... reserved. What was wrong?”

“Nothing.”

Clarissa narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips. “You know you’d better come right out with it.”

“Or what?”

“Or I’ll tie you to the bed again, like when you tried to hide the fact that you were with Phil.”

Just hearing his name made my blood run cold. Even Clarissa could see that she had caught me completely off guard. “I’m sorry,” she said remorsefully and put her hand on my forearm.

I was paralyzed and couldn’t even shake her off. Luckily, she got up again and picked up the bottle of champagne from the table. When I sat up, she was already holding out another full glass. “Here. You look like you could use this.”

I hated champagne, but it came in handy right now. This time, I only took three small sips.

“So,” Clarissa said, climbing back onto the bed and sitting opposite me. “Then tell me about it.”

“There’s not really anything to tell,” I mumbled. “Take three guesses ...”

“Okay. I’ll take a guess then. You’ve messed up.”

I nodded.

“You broke a promise?”

I covered my eyes with one hand. “Is it that obvious?”

“Who did you hurt?”

I excitedly stroked my hair and took a deep breath. “I guess Martin. But the real damage was done to his cousin.”

Clarissa laughed. “Oh, Lu! You’re just incorrigible. Does Martin know about this?”

“No,” I replied and took a sip.

“Then what’s the problem? He doesn’t have to know.”

“You don’t understand. Jonah ... I ... I really don’t think he’ll get over it that easily.”

At least I don’t.

The whole conversation made me uncomfortable, and I nervously turned the glass back and forth between my hands. Aware of the silence, which lasted longer than normal, I looked up. Clarissa was still sitting there, staring at me with a piercing gaze. The nibbling on her lower lip showed that her mind was working. “You are someone who does whatever he wants,” she thought aloud. “Not believing in love and all that shit. That’s all right. No one’s forcing you to. But...”

“Stop analyzing me!”

“But what happened seems to be getting you down ... Oh, oh ...” Her eyes widened and she opened her mouth. “Lu! You’re in love!”

I stared at her for at least five long seconds until I shook my head. “No. You’re wrong.”

“Oh yes, you like this guy, this cousin. But Lu, that’s wonderful!”

Now I was the one staring at her with wide eyes. I was still shaking my head, but now I was more scared. “Believe me, it’s not good.”

Clarissa’s expression turned anxious. “But there’s nothing you can do about it, is there?”

I nervously clenched my hands into fists, scanning my surroundings. My eyes fell on the cigarettes.

“Go on, light one up,” Clarissa said sympathetically.

I didn't hesitate for long and inhaled the first puff as deeply as I could. Meanwhile, Clarissa opened a window and sat back down on the bed.

“I have brought about a disaster,” I said quietly.

“That bad?”

I could only nod in response.

“Maybe it’s only half as bad as you think.”

“Maybe,” I conceded, hoping to end the conversation that way. But my thoughts continued to circle. “He reminds me of him.”

“Oh ... and ... how do you deal with it?”

“Well, I’m here, aren’t I?” I replied, forcing a sad smile on my face.

Clarissa accepted this and nodded. “I’m going to take a quick shower. Shall we order something to eat later? We could also watch a movie if you feel like it.”

“And who are you hiding from?” I asked.

“From Dominic. You don’t know him. But ... he ... I don’t know, I just need a bit of distance. He’s acting like we’re together.”

I knew that Clarissa had a very dysfunctional relationship. As much as she wanted safety, affection, and security, she was incapable of accepting them.

“Don’t worry,” I said. Now it was me who took her hand. “I’ll stay all night if you want.”

“Thank you,” she mumbled.

As she disappeared into the shower, I checked my cell phone. I’d noticed that it had vibrated a few times, but when I saw ten missed calls, three voicemails, and five messages, I could only shake my head.

Josephine.

I did her a favor and called her back, knowing that nothing could be as important as this avalanche suggested.

“Lu! Why are you only calling me back now? I was already worried!”

A glance at the clock told me that it was already eleven o’clock at night. “Hi, Jo! What’s up?”

“Let’s go to the matinee on Sunday.”

Shit ...



The concert at the exhibition. It came as no surprise to me that Josephine, of all people, caught wind of it.

“No.”

“Yes, it’s been far too long! I want to see you!”

“It’s not a good time right now,” I said, although I realized that this excuse wouldn’t do. With Josephine, the world could have been about to end—and even then, she wouldn’t have cared. “If you don’t show up, I’ll find you. I’m serious.”

“Fine!”

“There you go,” she said with satisfaction. “Then I’ll meet you in front of the entrance at twelve o’clock?”

“All right.” Shaking my head, I hung up again.

I’ll just go to this stupid matinee.

I finished the champagne, took the last drag of the cigarette, and tossed it in the glass of water. Then I followed Clarissa into the shower.

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### Jonah

It was almost absurd how I empathized with the little angel who was being beaten up by everyone else. The triangular arrangement and the divine light shining over everything drew me even deeper into the picture, and I wondered why I had been so blind and not noticed the intensity of the painting at the opening.

I glanced over my shoulder to make sure Simon was still there and hadn't just dropped me off. He sat relaxed on one of the fifty chairs set up and leafed through a program booklet while three musicians prepared for the concert. One by one, the visitors took their seats.

When Simon had mentioned the matinee, he had been so excited that he convinced me to come with him after church on Sunday. I had only found out after the service that the matinee was taking place in the exhibition where Lucien's paintings were hanging.

And there I was, mesmerized by the pain and suffering of the ugly little angel, completely unable to get the image of Lucien kneeling in front of me and sucking my cock out of my head.

Oh God ... get rid of that thought!

I had to get that image out of my head once and for all. I wasn't myself that day, not in the slightest. Even though I hadn't made it to confession yet, I pleaded for mercy at every prayer during Mass that morning. It was a shame what Lucien had tempted me to do ... and yet it felt so good.

Behind me, the musicians began to play. The spherical sounds of the double bass hummed through the exhibition rooms and my thoughts dipped an octave lower. A violin began to play, followed by the piano, and the music filled the white room with melancholy. My gaze was lost among the gloomy brushstrokes that formed cruel faces. The little angel's pained expression touched me so much that I sank completely into his dark world.

I was almost terrified when I turned to the side and Lucien was standing next to me. I hadn't noticed him at first—the distance between us was almost seven feet. No one would have thought that we could know each other. He stood there motionless, appearing tired and exhausted as he stared at his painting.

I scanned the audience, who were listening intently to the three musicians. A young woman turned her head and looked over at us. Her long brown hair was knotted into a bun, with a few strands framing her pretty, soft face. Her brows furrowed in concern, which inevitably gave the impression that she was Lucien's companion. She also sat at the edge of the row, with an empty chair next to her. When she turned back to the music, I took a step closer to Lucien. I followed his weary gaze and tried to guess what had captured his attention.

"I think I like it," I said quietly. "I don't know what it means, but I think I like it. And at the same time, it kind of scares me."

Lucien opened his mouth, but his breathing was heavy, and he couldn't say a single word. He drew his brows together and looked down at the floor as if the answer lay there. He clenched his jaw, and as the tension between us grew almost palpable, he

abruptly left me standing there, vanishing from the showroom.

Before I could bring myself to follow him, the woman from the audience got up and left the room too. Something tightened in my chest, and I felt like I had done something unspeakably evil. Didn't he like what I said?

Or had I not expressed myself properly?

Then I noticed Simon gesturing for me to join him. I shook off my thoughts of Lucien, took a deep breath, and sat down in my seat. I sat there with heavy limbs and was glad for the music and the fact that, despite my presence, I didn't have to contribute anything to the situation. I could just sit there and practice forgetting the whole story with Lu.

I wanted to pull my hair out and scream. As much as I tried to banish him from my mind, I couldn't. And the worst thing of all was that I couldn't explain why.

He took my cock ...

It was screaming inside me, and I felt like I was about to burst.

Martin's words, "Don't worry about it," echoed in my mind.

Easier said than done!

I found it surreal that Martin and I had similar upbringings. It seemed to me that he had turned his back on faith. It had been him who had encouraged me to go home with Daniela. If alcohol had not been involved, I could have suppressed my desire for love and tenderness—for my own good and the good of everyone else.

More images flashed in my head.

Lucien's embrace.

Our kiss.

His glowing green eyes.

And now I'm getting hard too!

My heart was racing faster than the trio could ever have played.

I would never be able to laugh about it!

I would never be able to get over what had happened—neither the thing with Daniela nor what I had let Lu do to me.

“Jonah!”

I was so lost in thought that I didn't even notice that the concert was over. I bounced one leg nervously and stared again at Lu's picture on the wall to my right.

“Stop it!” I shouted at myself as I stood up and followed Simon to the checkroom.

“Wasn't that your roommate?” Simon asked as we left the exhibition.

“Yes,” I replied curtly and tugged my scarf over my chin.

“Then that was his painting?”

I just nodded and let out a grumble.

“Why didn't you say anything?” Simon put on his cap. “I really would have liked to

have a chat with him. It's too bad he's already gone."

"Why do you want to talk to him?"

"Well, he's your roommate after all. And the last time I saw him, he was pretty... unresponsive."

My thoughts went back to that morning when I helped Lu up the stairs after Mass. A cold shiver ran down my spine.

I am going crazy.

"He wasn't responsive today either," I said angrily and picked up the pace.

"Uh... hey!" Simon called out and hurried after me. "What's the rush? Shall we go for a drink?"

Surprised, I stopped and turned to him. "Why?"

Simon laughed out loud. "Well, because that's what you do."

Of course.

Besides, the thought of going home wasn't particularly appealing either. So we went to the nearest café.

Contrary to my expectation that Simon would bother me with unpleasant questions, he simply engaged in conversation about the matinee and mentioned the films currently showing at the cinema. Somehow I envied him. It was a mystery to me how he could seemingly go through life completely unperturbed. Finally, I couldn't take it any longer and asked, "How do you balance your faith and science?"

“Oh, there’s nothing easier than that.” But when he saw my serious look, his smile disappeared, and he furrowed his brows thoughtfully. “Okay. Let me explain it like this: For me, they are two completely different things.”

“That sounds a little too easy to me,” I muttered, warming my hands on the teacup.

“Oh well. Three billion years ago, microorganisms didn’t care that God existed. They behaved as nature intended them to. Nature encompasses everything, and from its perspective, nothing is impossible. And so everything that is possible is natural. I find support in faith. Imagine how crazy the world around us would be if there were no order or hierarchies.”

“The world is crazy,” I interjected, feeling discouraged.

“Maybe, but as crazy as it may be, somehow everything has its justification.”

The way he said that made me perk up my ears. “What do you mean?”

Simon leaned back and crossed his arms behind his head. He grinned widely at me. “Let’s take the mouth, for example. Six hundred million years ago, it was a way for the first multicellular organisms to obtain food. But evolution didn’t stop there, because what we do with it today is amazing, isn’t it? We communicate! Isn’t that crazy? But what’s not natural about that?” He looked at me with his arms outstretched.

I would have liked to answer him, but the image of Lucien and what he had done with his mouth appeared before my eyes. And it had felt so good. Just thinking about it made something move in my pants again and I avoided Simon’s gaze in shame.

He leaned forward. “My faith gives me the freedom to find meaning in all of this.”

I could understand that to some extent. But what Lucien saw in blowing me was beyond my imagination. And I couldn't explain the point of two men having fun with each other like that either. So none of this made any sense at all.

After all, I'm not gay.



### Jonah

Simon's explanation had made sense to me, but that evening I lay on my bed brooding, staring at the ceiling and still wondering whether nature really didn't care when two men kissed. Unfortunately, I had to admit that I hadn't been as innocent with my tongue as I would have liked. What was the use if the basic concept of life—reproduction—was not guaranteed? And who in me was asking this question? The scientist or the believer? Confused, I rolled onto my side and heard Martin's voice in my mind, saying, "Don't worry."

I screamed inside and tore at my hair. What must he have gone through to come to this conclusion?

Did he suddenly not care about anything? If he had been home I could have asked him, but he worked another night at the hospital as a patient sitter.

Lucien crept into my thoughts again. Tormented, I turned to the other side and cursed him. He was the one who had upset me so much in the first place. His mere presence led me to do things I hadn't intended. And as irritated as I was to have met him at the matinee, I was glad I did.

He's so ... fragile.

Despite the dark aura that usually surrounded him like a protective cloak, something vulnerable about him awakened my protective instinct. Just the way he kept looking at me made me realize that something was going on deep inside him that he was trying to hide from me. And I was sure it was something that made him deeply sad.

Why do I care? Stop thinking these thoughts!

I would have loved to know what was going on in his head. If he had been home, I could have confronted him, which was long overdue anyway after what happened in the kitchen. Maybe I would calm down a bit if I surrounded myself with his things. At least it was worth a try. Getting up, I sneaked over to Lucien's room and hesitantly pushed the door open. To my surprise, it was ajar. The paper floor lamp in one corner was on, filling the room with dim light.

A sense of calm washed over me as I glanced at the photographs and posters adorning the walls. Stepping further into the room, I inhaled deeply, catching his scent lingering in the air. Without disturbing anything, I continued my exploration, observing the collection of records, stacks of drawing pads, art books neatly arranged on the shelf, and the array of brushes, paints, and other artistic tools meticulously displayed on the table.

Approaching the bed, I focused on the photos pinned on the wall above the lamp. There was Lucien with Steven, Steven with Marco, and Martin alongside a girl unfamiliar to me. Two particular photos caught my eye: one featured Lucien with the same young woman from the matinee, while the other depicted Lucien with a young man I couldn't place. They stood against a sunset backdrop on a beach, lost in laughter and each other's embrace. Lucien appeared strikingly different in the picture—his hair shorter, yes, but more notably, devoid of the gloom that seemed to envelop him now.

I carefully removed the photo from the wall, examining it closely. Inscribed on the

back were the initials P+L Vietnam , accompanied by a date from two and a half years ago. In the picture, P stood beside Lu, supporting him from both sides—one hand resting on his back, the other on his chest. Despite the broad grin captured in the image, there was an unmistakable tenderness and affection in the way P held and gazed at Lucien.

The image aggravated me, and it took some time to grasp why. Never during my time in the bar with Lucien had I witnessed such hearty laughter, revealing his gleaming white teeth.

All at once, I was overcome by a deep sadness. I sat down on the floor and leaned against the bed. Resting my chin on my knees, I became painfully aware I knew nothing about Lucien. I hadn't even managed to ask him a single personal question. Everything I knew about him I had learned along the way. For example, I found out he couldn't cook or that he only ate pureed tomatoes, leaving the larger pieces aside.

Lucien was certainly not a person who revealed much about himself, but I was convinced that if I had made more of an effort, I would have been able to deal with the situation better.

All of a sudden, the front door slammed shut. I flinched, startled.

Shit! Lu!

The door to the room was only ajar, and Lucien would be coming in at any moment. I quickly placed the photo next to the bedside lamp and hoped for a painless encounter. When Lucien entered and saw me, he stopped in surprise. "What are you doing here?" he asked irritably, looking around the room cautiously.

"What are you doing to me?" I asked, my voice shaking. "Do you enjoy messing with me?"

Lucien closed the door behind him and set his worn leather bag down to the floor. “I don’t understand.”

“Today! With that woman!” My voice sounded so demanding, accusatory, emotional, and strange that I covered my mouth in horror.

“Jo?” Lucien asked, irritated. “My sister?”

“What?”

“Josephine. She wanted to see how I was doing,” he explained, hanging his coat over the back of the chair and taking off his shoes.

“That’s ... nice,” I said sheepishly, hanging my head. I wanted to sink into the ground. “I should go.”

When I looked up again, Lucien was already sitting next to me. “What do you want in my room?” he asked calmly.

My heart was beating like a drum and I felt hot. It wasn’t good to have him so close to me. I couldn’t let that happen. I glanced toward the door for help but was unable to run away. I was paralyzed. “I just wanted to ...”

... feel a little better , I finished the sentence in my head.

Knowing that the woman was his sister had already helped. I should have been out the door by now.

“Can I kiss you?” Lucien asked out of the blue.

My heart stopped for a moment as I stared at him. “Why would you ask that?”

“I haven’t given you a choice yet,” he replied ruefully. “But I hope you won’t say no.”

The image that kept replaying in my mind since our last kiss was the moment I wrapped my hands around Lucien’s head and pushed him away. I thought, forever. But then he had sunk to his knees in front of me ...

And now he was sitting next to me, looking at me with his bright green eyes, sad and hopeful at the same time. He fascinated me so much that it took my breath away.

It seemed inconceivable that I would never kiss him again. The longing to feel his lips lingered in my thoughts, prompting a solemn nod.

Slowly, he leaned toward me and kissed me gently. Fireworks ignited in my head when his soft lips touched mine. His warmth flowed into me, followed by a tingling sensation on my skin that felt like bubbling spring water. Overwhelmed by his closeness, his scent, and his sudden passion, I gasped, held onto the bed and pressed myself against him.

My heart raced as he put his hand on the back of my neck and moved closer. When I opened my mouth and let his tongue in, his breath seemed to penetrate me. This time, I joined in the game, nudging the tip of his tongue with mine, circling it like a dance and sucking his lips into me. My whole body throbbed, heat rose to my head, and the blood pooled in my middle. I hesitantly touched Lucien’s neck, played with a few strands of hair and stroked his cheek with my thumb. He didn’t have much of a beard, but it seemed like he’d only shaved this morning. I ran my hand over his chest and ribs, found my way under his shirt, and stroked his back. His skin was much warmer than I expected, and my touch elicited a sweet sigh from him.

Lucien pulled away from my lips and kissed my neck. At the same time, he slipped both hands under my sweater and touched my nipples. I gasped and bit my lip.

“Take this off,” he said, pulling the sweater over my head. “Sit on the bed.”

The way he told me what to do made my blood boil and I obeyed him without resistance, sitting on the bed and watching him expectantly. Although I was hot, I felt a cool breeze and shivered. But maybe it was Lucien’s gaze. He greedily eyed my upper body, running his fingers over my neck, down my chest to my belly button. I flinched when he reached my waistband. My pants had long since become tight and the pulling sensation spread through my whole body. Lucien licked his lips and caressed my belly. A muffled groan escaped me. I was on the verge of unzipping my pants myself.

Lucien clearly enjoyed torturing me. He smiled mischievously and watched me intently as he continued to rub my penis through my pants. And God, he was getting faster and faster.

I found it hard to keep my composure. My eyelids kept falling shut, and as I opened my mouth to take a deep breath, he surprised me with a passionate kiss. I sank back onto the bed, and he leaned over me like a predator. His intense kiss made me forget everything. I just wanted him; I had completely succumbed to him.

I longingly pushed my hand back under his shirt. I wanted to feel his warmth even though my own body was already burning. Finally, he undid the button on my pants and slipped his hand inside.

“Holy...” I gasped as he touched me. In my mind’s eye, I saw him kneeling in front of me again and putting it in his mouth. I felt the wet, warm tightness and then ... I had already come.

Lucien smiled, still holding my penis and stroking one of my nipples with his other hand. I was breathing heavily, completely dazed by his intoxicating scent, and I still hadn't had enough. He observed my body with pleasure and continued massaging.

“Do you want to know what it feels like?”

I nodded anxiously, and Lu leaned over me to grab a condom and lube from a drawer. Then he removed my pants and threw them on the floor. Everything happened so fast, and suddenly, he was kneeling between my legs and yanking his shirt over his head. The sight of his beautiful body took my breath away. His muscles looked like those of a shapely statue in the soft light, and his skin appeared flawless and clear.

He leaned down to me, kissing a trail from my belly button to my cock. Even though I had just come, my body was already pumping a lot of blood into my center again, and when Lucien kissed my glans, a soft moan escaped me again.

He spread my legs a little wider, pushed a hand between my buttocks and touched me between them.

I flinched. Everything inside me went crazy for a moment, but that didn't stop him from continuing.

He played with my hole, gently massaging the nerve endings. My whole body convulsed with pleasure. I threw my head back and pushed out my chest. I let out such a passionate moan that I slapped my hand over my mouth. It was as if Lu was tickling someone out of me who had longed for such touches all his life.

“Don't stop,” I groaned and clutched the pillow.

I felt a slight pressure and an incredible sensation mixed with a sharp pain that sent a gasp escaping my lips as I glanced at Lu.

“Don't worry,” he said gently as he continued to stretch my hole. “It's just the tip of my finger.”

My whole body was electrified, my breathing stopped. With that little bit of pressure, I was on alert like an animal. But Lucien's confident smile calmed me down. "Try to relax."

I couldn't take my eyes off him. There was an unmistakable tenderness in his eyes, coupled with an infectious excitement. He was stunning, and his lips exuded temptation—I longed for it intensely—then he pushed his finger deeper into me. I sucked in a loud breath and threw my head back again. The feeling of pain and pleasure overwhelmed me.

Lucien leaned over me again and gave me a kiss. His finger was still inside me, but the kiss distracted me, and at one point, I felt him move his hand back and forth. I wrapped my arms around him and clawed at him as he continued.

My whole body tingled. Pain and pleasure alternated, running through my abdomen, making my cock twitch. And every time I thought the pain would subside, Lucien added another finger.

I lost all control, could hardly breathe, and didn't know where my head was. Lucien kissed my neck and nibbled on my nipples. He explored my body and at some point, he pulled his hand out of me.

I could hear him peeling off his pants and caught a glimpse of his erect penis. He quickly put on a condom and moved closer to me again. When he put his tip on and I felt the pressure, I held my breath. Then I gave in.

The feeling of being filled by him made everything else disappear. Pushing further and further into me. I opened my mouth and gasped for air. The pain finally became unbearable, and a scream escaped me, causing Lucien to pause.

I gritted my teeth and took a deep breath. I had never felt anything like it. It felt as if



Lucien was pushing everything out of me. There was only him. Everywhere. I exhaled and looked at him, nodding barely visibly. I was ready.

Lucien began to move slowly and very carefully, and it was only at that moment that I realized what was happening. But I couldn't fight it anymore. I no longer wanted to fight it. It just felt too good.

Lucien triggered a storm inside me that gripped my every fiber and sent me flying higher and higher. He leaned over me, devouring me with kisses. His skin shone under a thin film of sweat and his loud breathing heated me up even more. Without warning, he put his hand on my throat. A tingling sensation ran through me and I stretched my neck. I surrendered to his rhythm, succumbing to his thrusts, listening to his soft moans, and enjoying the way he drilled me harder and harder.

He finally sat up, his face covered in lust. His hair fell over his face, and he seemed so wild ... so passionate. He pulled out of me, lifted my legs, and put my feet on his shoulders. When he penetrated me again, he closed his eyes, and a soft moan escaped his beautiful lips. He found his rhythm again and thrust deeper and deeper into me until he reached a point inside me that set off the bomb. I could no longer hold back. "Aaah, keep going!"

Lucien increased the pace, became faster and faster, went deeper and deeper. And he kept touching that one spot inside me that was almost driving me crazy. He drove me closer and closer to the cliff ... and eventually over it. The orgasm rolled in like a huge wave and swept me away. Every muscle in my body stiffened. "Oooh yessss ..." I pushed my breast out, moaned loudly, and squirted on my stomach.

Lucien didn't stop. He spread my legs again and lay on top of me, sinking into me faster and faster, letting out a low growl as he also approached the cliff. His breathing intensified, and I felt his penis get bigger, and then it happened—his whole body tensed as he arched and poured himself into me.

I had never felt so happy in my life. Completely exhausted, I shut my eyes and drifted into a deep sleep within a few minutes.

### Jonah

It was midnight when I woke up again. Once I regained the ability to think, a storm erupted in my mind. Thoughts were racing through my head, and I felt like I was being run over by the whole situation.

Lucien was sleeping with his head on my shoulder, one leg over mine, his hand on my chest. My breath caught in my throat, and my heart stopped. Heat waves and chills alternated and shot through my body in bursts. And I definitely didn't want him to wake up—I couldn't bear to look into his eyes at that moment—so I carefully removed my arm from under him. The movement made him turn to the other side, allowing me the opportunity to get away from him. Still, I felt the warmth of his butt against me, bringing me closer like a magnetic force and igniting the desire again.

Oh God, help me!

I got out of bed with the utmost care and consideration. But as I sat up, a sudden, stabbing pain shot through my back, as if something had remained inside me. I struggled to push the feeling away and tried to stretch, hoping to ease the discomfort.

I tiptoed across the room to collect my clothes, then slipped into my boxers. As I stood up straight, my eyes fell on Lucien. His mouth was slightly open, and he was clinging to the pillow the same way he had clung to me before. In the soft light of the

floor lamp, his naked upper body appeared as if it had been carved from stone. I had to admit, he was just beautiful.

My God, what are you doing to me?

My memories flooded back, overwhelming me with a sudden wave of nausea. I tore my gaze away from him, slipping silently out of the room. More thoughts raced through my mind at breakneck speed. Sleep was out of the question—I needed to regain composure first. And for me, the best way to do so was to run.

A little later, wrapped up in warm layers, I ventured out into the cold and ran along the river to the lake and then back toward the university. The exercise did me good, and the pain in my back gradually subsided. An icy wind hit my face as the drizzle grew heavier. I rushed through the city like a madman, but I couldn't shake off the memories.

What had gotten into me? Why had I let it get this far in the first place? The Bible spoke of abominations! And I, me, had committed it! It was a disgrace! I was a disgrace! I had never sinned so much in my life. I had violated all my principles. I couldn't even afford to go to confession now—that wouldn't absolve me of my misdeeds. And not even Simon's theory could reassure me, because what I had done was an act against the laws of nature.

What I did to Lucien ... what I let him do to my body ... and I enjoyed it ... and I still felt him inside me...

My first time!

Feeling sick, I leaned against a streetlamp, bent over, and threw up. My stomach muscles contracted painfully, and my knees were weak. I stood there, breathing heavily, holding onto the lamppost and watching saliva drip from my mouth in a long

string.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of a person. Turning my head slightly, I saw an older gentleman strolling with a dachshund on a leash.

“Is everything all right, young man?”

“No!” I cried, hitting the lamppost hard. “Nothing is all right!”

The man scowled and motioned for his dog to move forward. I gazed up at the dark, despairing sky and drew in a deep breath. Thick drops of rain pattered against my face. They felt like ice water. My head was burning with heat. I realized that only I could fix it. I had no choice but to free myself from these shameful feelings and unnatural urges and become a better person.

I returned home completely soaked and went straight to Lucien’s room. He sat on the floor in sweatpants and a white shirt, drawing with chalk on a pad.

“Did you go running?” he asked incredulously.

My whole body was shaking, and my teeth were chattering. “I ... can’t do that,” I stuttered with difficulty. “I-it’s n-not natural.”

Lucien put the drawing pad down and stood up. “You need to warm up.”

“No!” I shouted and backed away. “I-it was a mistake!”

Lucien came to a sudden stop and furrowed his brows in irritation. His look hurt me like a knife, but I had to stand firm. “How could I have let that happen? I ... will never forgive myself for that!”

“Don’t do this to yourself,” he said, his voice tinged with concern. “You liked it, didn’t you?”

“How could you do this to me? Why did you seduce me? You knew ... Everything was fine before!”

He looked at me in dismay. “You don’t mean that. Calm down first.”

“I am calm!” I snapped at him. “And dirty! I can never clear myself of this!”

“Of this?” Lucien faltered, and his voice sounded strained. “Of ... me?”

My jaw dropped and I took a deep breath. It hadn’t been my intention to hurt him. His life choices were his own and deserving of respect. In some respects, I even admired him for them. However, that lifestyle wasn’t for me.

Lucien stepped closer and touched my arm. “Jonah, you are choosing something that doesn’t exist.”

“How dare you?” I shouted angrily and pushed him away from me. “What do you want from me anyway?”

Lucien stumbled back two steps before regaining his footing. He stared at me with wide eyes, his mouth open. He remained silent, and I longed for his words to change my mind. But he kept his eyes on the ground and took a shaky breath in and out.

At that moment I wanted to tell him how sorry I was, but I couldn’t. I was frozen. As if on autopilot, I left his room, shut the door behind me, and went straight into the shower.

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I had been having a hard time falling asleep for the past few weeks, but after that night I found it impossible to sleep at all. The guilty conscience tormented me so much that I thought I had arrived in the well-deserved hell of insomnia. A siren was constantly wailing in my head, which got louder as soon as I got into bed. When I closed my eyes, I saw images from the night we shared with Lucien, so I kept them open and stared out at the world day and night like a zombie.

“If you’re going to spend your nights studying, you might as well combine it with something meaningful,” Martin said a few days later and handed me a flyer from the volunteer sitting watch.

My fear of running into Lucien was so great that I listened at the door before leaving my room. When I heard him come home at night and take a shower, I would lie in bed, heart racing and sweating, staring at the ceiling, afraid that he would finally be the one to barge into my room and demand a conversation. If I had worked as a patient sitter, I would have been spared all of this. I would also have enjoyed helping someone selflessly. On the other hand, I would have put on the mask of a philanthropic liar. Helping strangers, pretending that there was nothing wrong with me, while it was me who was causing trouble around me. No, doing that would only have brought me more shame. And it wouldn’t have been a punishment if I felt good about what I was doing.

Once again I increased my running distance, running double the distance every day, and after a few days, my muscles became so sore that I could barely walk. Completely exhausted, I dragged myself through the cold days and thanked God for making self-flagellation so easy.

Later that day, I met up with Simon at the library to do research for an upcoming test.

“If you don’t feel well, you should go home,” Simon whispered to me across the table.

He sat in front of an open book and stared at me. A chill ran down my spine and I scanned the library to make sure no one was watching or overhearing us. For the sake of peace, I smiled at his well-intentioned suggestion, because I didn't want to rest at home for anything in the world.

"It's not the end of the world if you call in sick."

"I'm not sick."

"Oh, really? But you look like it."

"I'm fine," I assured, closing my book and standing up.

But Simon was right. My physical condition had deteriorated so much that I had to do something. Go home. Take a bath. Sleep for a long time. Anything. But in a twisted, almost masochistic way, I enjoyed being unhappy. God was playing a trick on me, and I had no chance of winning against Him. Punishment was about humbly accepting it, not wallowing in the suffering it caused. I was standing helplessly in front of the bookshelf, wondering what else I could do to punish myself, when Simon appeared next to me, pushed his book back onto the shelf, and purposefully plucked out a new one. "Or did you just want to take this one?" he asked.

"Uh ... Hmm. You're right," I said tiredly. "I'd better go home." To the place I least wanted to be at the moment—that would do the trick for now.

"You've probably taken on too much in the last few days," Simon said and put his hand on my shoulder.

I reflexively slapped it away and backed away in horror. He had no reason to touch me, and I certainly didn't deserve his understanding. I could see on his face that he was trying to analyze my behavior. "Go and rest," he simply said and returned to the



table.

My head was pounding as I waited at the streetcar stop. Dark gray clouds hung over the city and small white flakes fell from the sky. Everything seemed so peaceful, but there was a storm raging inside me.

Lucien

I was so fed up. Of people. Of promises. Of expectations. Of hopes. Of Jonah. And, above all, of myself.

As strong as the emotions were boiling inside me, I lacked the energy to bring them to the surface. I felt like a stone—heavy, dull, and weak. All the muscles that I didn't urgently need were paralyzed and my breathing was shallow. I felt empty and so did my circulation. I felt dizzy all the time and food disgusted me. Just thinking about the gooey substance in my mouth made me feel sick.

But it was my own fault. I hadn't wanted to give up hope with Jonah and had shown him a world that could only be lived in my dreams. His religion stood between us, and Jonah had made it very clear to me that I was the last piece of trash for him. I had defiled him.

I had been so stupid—he would never confess to me. And why should he? I knew for myself that I was nothing more than dirt. I had brought guilt upon myself, and now it threatened to crush me like a rock. The thing from two years ago clung to me like an evil spirit, and everything had gone downhill even more since the thing with Jonah. Maybe I was cursed because everything I touched turned into shit. Even if I had wanted to, I would never have escaped it all. They had become my personal hell. Phil and Jonah. Jonah and Phil. My thoughts hadn't been about anything else for two

weeks.

I ignored all the messages, spent most of my time in the studio, where at least no one had to deal with me, and tried to concentrate on my art—without success. The last thing left for me was to slip away from me too.

And then there was the damn anniversary!

Seated in drawing class, I fixated on a stunning bouquet of flowers, the sound of pencils scratching against paper amplifying my discomfort. It felt as though I might burst from within, an unbearable pulsation coursing through my body like a ticking time bomb. My throat constricted, each breath a painful endeavor.

Why am I still here at all? Why today?

I sat in front of the blank page until the bell rang. But even that wasn't a relief. I just sat there paralyzed. My body didn't want anything anymore.

"Are you coming?" Steven asked from somewhere in the distance.

I took a breath and packed up.

"Gilliéron, a word!"

Again?

"I'll wait outside," Steven said.

I hesitantly approached Seeger, who slid a handful of sketches into his folder.

"I haven't received your concept for the term paper yet," he said in his stern tone.

Damn.

When I didn't answer, he peered over the rim of his glasses and gave me a curious look. I didn't even have the strength to put on a sheepish smile or use my charm in any other way, and a lie wouldn't work with the man anyway. On the other hand, it was optional to have the concept checked. So why should I even bother?

“Don't you want me to approve it?” Seeger asked, somewhat irritated. “Because it seems to me that migration is not your topic. That's why I would recommend that you definitely take advantage of the opportunity to get feedback.”

I still didn't know what to say. My thoughts were all about Phil.

“Are you all right?” Seeger asked with concern. “You seem a little pale.”

And then I saw it in his eyes again. That sparkle. It wasn't the same as a year ago, but it was exactly what had reminded me of Phil back then. Had I ever actually apologized to Seeger for the kiss?

I really am a disaster. My presence alone must be a burden for him. Let's get this over with.

“I'm ... I'm sorry that I kissed you.”

Seeger frowned in surprise. “That was over a year ago, Gilliéron.”

“It won't happen again.” As empty as I had felt the last few days, I was now fighting back tears.

Shit, man, how pathetic!

His expression softened. “What’s happened? Is it over the same thing as a year ago?”

I regained my composure, took a deep breath, and rubbed my eyes. “Am I dismissed?” I asked in a shaky voice.

Seeger seemed undecided and stared at me with concern. “What’s bothering you? Maybe I can help.”

I hung my head and exhaled. “Thank you, but ... I’m fine.” I slipped out of the room without looking up. It was half past four and I didn’t want to see anyone anymore. I just wanted to be alone, so I took the back exit. Steven would be fine.

My route led me to the gas station, where I bought a bottle of vodka before heading straight to the studio. My only goal: to get drunk as quickly as possible. That seemed doable, given my stomach was almost empty.

But once I was in the studio, I realized that even the isolation didn’t give me any peace. I was pacing around like a junkie in withdrawal. Memories raged in my head like a thunderstorm. The feelings of guilt almost tore me apart and I wanted to scream.

It wasn’t until I had drunk about half of the bottle that a sense of calm finally washed over me—or, at the very least, over my body. From then on, I felt miserable. While I was sitting on the couch smoking a cigarette, Martin knocked on the door and entered the studio.

Great ...

His eyes darted around as if he was looking for something.

A rope, perhaps? Or a couple of razor blades?

“Hello,” he said.

I took a drag on my cigarette and flicked the ash into the ashtray on my lap. Martin froze a few steps in front of me as the half-empty vodka bottle caught his attention.

“Whad’ya want?” I slurred.

“I’m here to take you home.”

“Wha’ for?”

“We’re worried about you.”

“We? Who’s ... we?”

“Believe it or not, your professor wanted to talk to Steven today because he’s worried. And Steven called me again earlier because he hasn’t been able to get through to you for two weeks.”

My shoulders sagged. “I’m fine.”

“No. You’re not fine, Lu! That’s pretty obvious.”

“It doesn’t matter. Just leave me...”

“... to drown in misery? No! You’re coming home with me now.”

“Please, Martin ... not today.” My voice became a quiet pleading. The anniversary was crushing me.

“Today of all days. I know you too well and I don’t want to see you end up doing

something to yourself—even if it’s just an accident. We both know how clumsy you can be. If needed, I’ll haul you home and put you under lock and key. Or you can come along willingly and at least preserve your dignity. It’s up to you.”

I remained seated. My body felt heavy like a boulder. I sluggishly ran my hands over my face.

Dignity ... As if I really had a choice ...

If Martin had set his mind on something, there was no way around it.

Today of all days, when I just wanted to get drunk ... Fuck.

While I stubbed out my cigarette, Martin nodded contentedly and retrieved my coat. Still unable to pull myself together, I leaned forward to grab the bottle, but Martin was quicker and snatched it from under my nose.

“That’s enough for today,” he said and walked toward the sink.

“Hey, don’t throw that away now ...”

“Don’t worry, but at least it’s staying here.”

I finally got up from the sofa.

Concentrate, Lu!

I felt dizzy as the force of gravity seemed almost overpowering, but I managed to hold myself upright.

“Here,” Martin said and handed me the coat.

I put it on, staggered back to the sofa to pack my cigarettes, and then followed Martin out. Since I struggled to find the lock, he grabbed the key from me and locked the door. Meanwhile, I leaned against the wall, my head back, trying to ignore the fact that everything was spinning around me.

“There. Come on now.” Martin pressed the keys into my hand and pulled me along. I heard a metallic clang behind me. By the time I realized it was my keys, Martin had shoved them into my coat pocket.

As if in a trance, I followed him out. Somehow the world had become more or less bearable in the last half hour. My feelings of guilt and my pain were under control, the memories banished.

Then I’ll just go home with Martin... Whatever...

The fresh evening air and the short walk to the bus stop did me good. It was all the more difficult on the packed bus, where I had to squeeze myself against one of the windows.

“I told Jonah that we’re all eating together today,” Martin said casually when we finally got off the bus.

Oh no!

“No, that ...”

“Don’t argue with me! You need to eat, and having some company will do you good.”

As our house came into view, I desperately searched for a way to escape. However, in my drunken state, I would probably have crashed into the nearest wall, so I just



trotted after Martin like a dog.

Jonah

I was still in the library when Martin called me. At first, I ignored it, but he persisted and kept trying, so I finally motioned for Simon to keep an eye on my things and stepped out.

“Hey! Dinner together tonight,” Martin said shortly.

Within seconds, I was gripped by an inner coldness. As much as I had tortured myself over the last few days, it was only at that moment that I realized that it had been ridiculous compared to what I was about to face. Eating together meant sitting at the same table as Lucien. And that scared the crap out of me.

“Uh ... what? But I’m still in the library.” This excuse sounded lame even to my ears.

“We won’t be home until half past seven anyway.”

“But I’m studying for my exams here.”

“The library closes at eight anyway.”

“But ... why?”

Martin was silent for a moment. “We are roommates,” he said emphatically. “We eat together occasionally. And a break from studying will do you good. We’re having spaghetti.”

This time, he didn’t give me a chance to speak and hung up.

Shit.

For two weeks, I’d managed to avoid running into Lucien. That hadn’t been difficult since he was never home anyway. He would only come back at night, if at all, then took a shower and was gone again the next morning.

I was convinced he hated me. I hadn’t even bothered to apologize to him. My self-loathing was greater than ever. I didn’t deserve to be sitting at the same table as him. But even more important was the question of whether Martin suspected anything.

He couldn’t be making a meal together for no reason.

But then I understood.

Maybe he had already seen through me. The perfect world I try to make everyone believe...

Not only was I a hypocrite, but I was probably also a bad actor. In this sense, a scolding would have been well deserved. I wouldn’t have been surprised if he had already informed my parents—about everything.

Holy ... I’m going straight to hell! If the evening turns out to be anywhere near as uneventful as I’m hoping, I’ll be lucky.

The time on my cell phone showed it was only six, so I went back inside and sat

down behind the books. But my concentration was gone. My thoughts were with Lucien and the images of our night together—although it wasn't even a full night—flashed before my mind.

Lucien taking off his shirt.

His naked upper body.

How he kissed me, touched me ... and in the most outrageous places.

And me ... how I was consumed with lust and desire for him.

Startled by my own thoughts, I jumped and slammed my knee on the table. That, in turn, made me jump again and I suppressed a yelp. Fortunately, the pain had relieved the tightness in my pants.

Damn it! What's wrong with you, Jonah?

Simon glanced up and frowned. A warning "Ssh!" hissed from another table. I pretended nothing had happened and hid behind my laptop. But a few minutes later, my nervousness rose again. I kept bouncing my right leg so that the person sitting next to me at one point exhaled in annoyance, gave me a stern look, and left. I kept glancing at the clock. Time was racing by.

Damn ... Martin knows. I'm sure of it. Lucien told him everything. But why? Why would he do that? I know I've made a mistake. I would undo it if I could.

The whole time I thought about Lucien and how he beamed at me with his beautiful green eyes. I liked the way he wore his hair—slightly curled and unruly, which was a perfect fit for an artist like him. He had style and was confident, embracing life to the fullest.

Not like me, who was still patronized far too much by my parents. I could have searched for a job a long time ago, but I was too comfortable and let them carry me. Even though I didn't want to go back. As much as life here in Zurich was upsetting me, God would make sure I found my way. But there was no way I wanted to go back to the farm after my studies.

My thoughts returned to Lucien again. His warm body snuggled up to me while his lips devoured me.

Damn it! Stop it already!

My thoughts were almost driving me mad.

I'm not gay! I'm not into men!

My eyes wandered across the screen to Simon. He was typing with great concentration, then he took the pen and wrote something down in a notebook. Lost in thought, he shifted his jaw back and forth, continuing to type as he referenced the book's open page beside him.

I noticed his slim body. You could tell he was athletic, even through his sweater. His broad shoulders conveyed strength, while the wide neckline offered a glimpse of his prominent collarbone. I glanced past his pronounced Adam's apple and admired his handsome face. His brown hair waved slightly and matched the color of his dark brown eyes. I hadn't noticed how wide his brows were before, but it suited him. Together with his angular cheekbones, they created a balance in his face that gave him a very likable look. His lips were also beautiful. A little narrow, perhaps, but well-shaped.

However, the thought of kissing Simon left me cold. I tried to push my fantasy further and imagine him performing oral sex on me, but I felt no arousal.

There you go. Proof enough. I'm not gay.

I noticed Simon peering at me questioningly, so I put on a sheepish grin, just shook my head, and tried to concentrate on my work again. We continued working like this until my stomach growled around half past seven.

"I'm hungry too," Simon said and packed up his things. "See you on Sunday?"

Oh ... the church.

"Um, I'll see if I can come," I replied vaguely. The last few weeks had shown me that it was better not to make any more promises that I might not be able to keep.

We said goodbye at the streetcar stop and I walked home. Anything that delayed my return was fine for the time being, but it was too cold for me to take any more detours.

As I entered the apartment, I heard Martin's voice. "Yes, everything's fine ... mhm ... see you then."

I placed my bag down and entered the kitchen. Martin was just putting his cell phone away as he moved toward the sink, where there was a large colander full of steaming spaghetti. There were empty plates on the kitchen counter next to it, and Lucien was sitting in his place with his elbows on the table and his forehead resting in his hands. A lit cigarette clung between his fingers and a bottle of beer stood in front of him.

"Hello, Jonah!" Martin greeted me. "You're just in time."

"Hello."

Lucien straightened up. His gaze slid past me to the window and lingered there,

staring absently into the darkness.

I couldn't help but stare at him. He appeared tired and exhausted, with dark circles under his eyes.

Has he lost weight?

"Sit down," Martin said benevolently and placed a full plate in front of me.

I sat down and wiped my damp hands on my pants. Martin then set a plate down for Lucien and himself and sat next to me. He smiled at me but couldn't hide how tense he was. When I reached for my fork, he laughed in surprise.

"What, no table prayer?"

Oh no, not good. Please behave normally, Jonah!

"Thank you ... for the food."

"Nonsense! Get on with it!" he said, amused.

After the first bite, I realized how hungry I actually was. Unknowingly, I had subjected myself to food deprivation. At that moment, it felt like I hadn't tasted anything between my teeth for the past two weeks. I devoured the food without much attention to chewing, blocking out everything around me in the process. For a brief moment, it was just me and the noodles. As I emptied the plate, I exhaled a sigh of relief and glanced around.

Lucien's plate remained untouched as he continued to gaze out the window with a sense of listlessness. When he took a sip of beer and realized that the bottle was empty, he pushed himself up from the table and got another one from the fridge. It

was obvious he hadn't just had one beer. He could barely stand upright. Visibly happy to have made it through the kitchen, he plopped back into his chair, opened the bottle, and took a sip. As soon as Martin pushed his own empty plate away, Lucien lit a cigarette.

The silence was oppressive.

Has it been like this all along? Or have I been so busy eating to notice?

"Guys, that's enough. I know you can't stand each other ... for whatever reason ..."  
Martin said, "but what's so bad about having dinner together?"

Lucien ran his hands over his face, then through his hair. He made no move to say anything.

"It's all right," I mumbled.

"Lu, please eat!" Martin said, looking at Lucien's full plate.

But he simply took a drag on his cigarette, put it out, and stared at Martin with an angry glint in his eyes. I was surprised that I wasn't the one receiving that furious look, and when I saw the worried expression on Martin's face, I didn't understand anything.

"I can't believe you're doing this to me..." Lucien said with a heavy tongue.

Martin remained calm. "I mean well."

Lucien rose abruptly, but his movement faltered almost instantly. "No!" he said in a trembling voice and leaned on the table. It took him a moment to collect himself. "You could have done that here any damn night. But not today!" He sounded angry



but also desperate and sad. He clumsily grabbed the beer bottle and staggered out of the kitchen.

As his bedroom door slammed behind him, Martin sighed. "I'm sorry."

A stone should have fallen from my heart when I realized this wasn't about me at all, but it didn't. "What was that about?"

Martin forced himself to smile sadly and moved Lucien's plate closer. "Do you want half of it? You seem hungry."

I didn't respond. "What was this all about?"

"About an anniversary that is today. He's never in a good mood."

"Anniversary? What anniversary?"

"Nothing to do with you," he replied curtly, scooping half of Lucien's spaghetti onto my plate.

How can you be so sure?

### Jonah

I ought to have been relieved that Lucien paid me no attention whatsoever. This way, there was no chance of succumbing to temptation. Crossing the line had done more damage to me than I wanted to admit, and as busy as I was with damage control, the sight of Lucien during our meal lingered in my mind. He didn't need to articulate it; I could discern it not only in his eyes but in his entire demeanor. His body language screamed at me that I had deeply wounded him.

It may well be that his condition that evening, as Martin insisted, had nothing to do with me, but from my point of view, I was still a coward who hadn't managed to apologize to Lucien. So I felt lucky to be ignored because a beating would have been well deserved.

To my surprise, the weekend passed quietly. I went to Mass on Sunday, but my thoughts weren't even there. Since we had that meal together, the apartment has felt eerily deserted, as if I was living alone in the shared house.

Martin spent his time in hospital, while Lucien was likely in his studio. The apartment became my tiny microcosm where I felt more and more comfortable. The night sweats gradually subsided and I stopped listening at the door before leaving my room. Over the course of the week, the absence of my roommates had become so commonplace that I was starting to worry. I stared at Lucien's empty seat and

wondered where he was hanging out, where he was showering. Whether he was all right so far. All these thoughts made me tired. I didn't even have the energy to run and spent most of my time at home doing nothing.

But my peace wasn't to last a week. When Martin found me in the kitchen on Friday morning, he snapped. "That's disgusting!" he shouted, pointing at the dirty dishes I'd been piling up in the sink for five days. "I live here too, and my busy schedule doesn't excuse you from neglecting everything here!"

I sat at the kitchen table with a cup of tea in my hand and faced him. "I can't sleep," I grumbled.

"What?" Martin's voice cracked and he frowned in disbelief. "I don't give a shit! You'd better clean up!" He snatched his bag from the floor and left the apartment in a huff.

That hit the mark. But for the sake of peace and quiet, I tidied up and cleaned. It was my first time running a household. With Christmas approaching, exams looming, and chaos in my head, a little support wouldn't have hurt. Plus, I couldn't shake the feeling that something else was brewing. Despite Martin and Lu's absence during the week, the tension in our apartment seemed to increase exponentially.

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"I'm going for a drink with Oliver and Thomas today," Simon said during the lunch break. "Are you coming?"

It was as if God had answered my prayers. There was no one at home, and I desperately needed to distract myself. The only thing that prevented me from agreeing straight away was the question of whether I was allowed to have fun at all.

“Come on, it’s Friday!” Simon said, as if he had read my mind, and so I joined the guys.

First, we went out for pizza, then to Langstrasse. The positive effect of the alcohol came at just the right time. It carried me through the evening and into the night like a wave of lightness, and I enjoyed the time with my fellow students.

Unlike Martin and Lucien, who dragged me from one bar to the next, we only changed venues once that evening because Thomas was dissatisfied with the selection of women. Although he was a typical nerd, he had no problems chatting with girls.

By midnight, we found ourselves in a lively rock bar with an excellent atmosphere. It was the very same bar where I had been with Lucien that Sunday, where he had later showcased his poems in my presence. At that time, only a handful of people had been present, but now every stool at the bar was occupied—the place was bustling. Fortunately, as we walked in, a bar table next to the window happened to be vacant. While Simon went to the bar to get some beer, I took off my jacket and sat down on a stool. Thomas wasted no time and chatted up the first woman standing next to him. When Simon returned with beer, she was already rolling her eyes and left Thomas standing there.

After the incident with Daniela, I had grown more cautious. With my low alcohol tolerance, I was wary of subjecting myself to the embarrassment of failure once more. Consequently, I kept to the sidelines, observing from a safe distance as Oliver and Thomas took the lead. I talked to Simon about the latest movies. When we were on our second beer, Thomas came back to our table and sighed in frustration. “I really wonder what women desire. It feels like it's impossible to please them.”

Simon offered him an encouraging pat on the shoulder. “You’ll get there. Just keep going.”

“Well, there’s obviously hope,” Thomas muttered and pointed across the room. “See that guy over there? The one with the brunette? He made out with a blonde in the toilet an hour ago.”

I followed Thomas’s gaze to the other side of the bar. In a dimly lit corner, a woman with long, dark curls was wrapped around a man, pressing herself against him and engaging in passionate, deep kisses that threatened to devour him. When she turned her head to the other side and I saw the guy’s face, my breath caught in my throat.

Lu?

He put both hands on her head and kissed her just as passionately, obviously unable to get enough of her.

God doesn’t make a difference either , I thought again. The blood rushed to my legs and my heart began to race. I gripped the table, overwhelmed by a sudden wave of dizziness. I couldn’t fathom why the shock hit me so intensely.

“Ha!” Simon laughed. “Jonah, isn’t that your crazy roommate?”

I glanced at Lucien with a petrified expression and nodded, fearing that words would betray the depth of my distress at the sight.

Simon grinned. “Looks like he’s having fun, huh?”

“What does he have that we don’t?” Thomas inquired, shaking his head in dismay.

“He’s an artist,” Simon explained. “We nerds can’t compete with that.”

“Great ... and I thought scientists were finally cool.”

“You’ve probably watched too many TV shows.”

I smiled casually, pretending to follow the conversation, but in truth, I couldn’t take my eyes off Lu. As the woman disengaged from him, she leaned in and whispered something into his ear, prompting him to lower his head and nod slightly. The shimmer of desire was evident in his eyes; he regarded her like a predator. I recognized that look, and unexpectedly, it pierced me in the chest. The woman helped him into his coat and buttoned it up. As she prepared to leave, Lucien tilted his head back, gazing at the ceiling, and took a deep breath. Finally, the woman linked arms with him and guided him out of the bar.

It was only then that I realized how drunk he was. He could barely walk straight, which is why he finally put his arm around her shoulder to support himself. An expression crossed his face that felt entirely foreign to me. Anxiously, I trailed them toward the exit. When I eventually navigated through the crowd onto the street, they were climbing into a cab.

No, that wasn’t fun , I thought, although I couldn’t even have said what else it should have been. Stunned, I rejoined the boys, downed my beer, and ordered another. None of this held any interest for me anymore—let Lucien do as he pleased with whomever he pleased. Even though we shared the same apartment, we lived in completely different worlds.

It didn’t take long for my thoughts to drift in another direction. What exactly is my role to him? Have I misread him? Am I just a toy for him? What’s the point of our night together and all the emotional chaos? Does it mean nothing to him at all? Am I just— a lump formed in my throat— a means to an end?

Lucien

I had always believed I couldn't reach a lower point, but now, trapped in this descending spiral of self-loathing, I no longer cared about my fate. If I could, I would have put a bullet in my skull. The thing with Jonah had completely pulled the rug out from under me and I had fallen into a deep hole ... falling deeper and deeper. My body was numb. I longed to feel something again, and yet, at the same time, everything felt unbearable. There wasn't enough alcohol in the world to relieve the tension in every fiber of my body.

Clarissa meant well when she took me to her house. I knew Steven was having a party there, but I just didn't feel like showing up. Now I was here after all.

The house felt familiar to me, as if I had lived there for years, and somehow it was, because I had spent half my childhood there. But when Clarissa and I entered the party, even the familiar rooms couldn't make me feel at ease. Without removing my coat, I grabbed a bottle of vodka and wandered among the revelers like a ghost, ignoring everyone chatting me up. Steven's friends were also my friends ... or something like that. Right now, though, I didn't give a damn. I started cursing at Clarissa. I just wanted to blow my brains out and then fuck her. I wasn't certain about the sequence of events, but what was clear was my annoyance at her vanishing into the crowd to dance with her friends amidst the loud music.

Finally, I went to the basement where her room was. The hallway led directly into the garden, where a few people were smoking and consuming who knows what else. As scatterbrained as I was, I tripped over the runner and would have fallen cold to the ground if someone hadn't caught me. His upper arms must have been twice the size of mine—maybe a bodybuilder or a bouncer. I knew these guys from the gym. Full of discipline. Judging by the beer in his hand, today must be his cheat day.

I moved away from him and tried to regain my composure, putting on all my charm. But I was way too dizzy, and the conversation he engaged me in was, to say the least, beyond my limits. However, I did notice that he kept touching me. The guy smiled and seemed quite nice. I found out his name was Ben and that he worked security—what a surprise. He seemed to like me, which eventually made me overlook the fact that Clarissa was probably no longer an option for that evening. When Ben tried to figure out what kind of person I was by making suggestive comments, I took a long drink from the bottle and gave him a seductive smile. “You can do whatever you want with me. I don't care about anything.” I tried hard not to sound too drunk, because I was serious, although I still didn't know whether I wanted to feel something or nothing at all.

Ben seemed to like my answer because he grinned mischievously. Without a word, I followed him out into the huge garden. It had never been important to me whether man or woman, above or below. With Ben, one look was enough to know what he was made of—his dominance even turned me on.

So, whatever ...

As far as I was concerned, he could do whatever he wanted with me. I had long since lost control anyway. And as much as I'd fought to get it back over the last few days, it wasn't important to me at that moment. Ben was bursting with strength and masculinity and looked like he was about to burst with testosterone. He was exactly what I needed right now.



When I felt his tongue in my mouth and his hand on my cock, I was relieved to feel the touch and not be completely numb. He pulled up my coat, tore down my pants, and grabbed me roughly between my buttocks. Just a few split seconds later, a sharp pain shot through my body. He was in a hurry and reminded me that it had been a very long time since I used this position. But even if I had wanted to stop the whole thing, I was no longer able to, so I let it all happen.

Ben yanked me around, pushing me against the shed wall and his hard cock against my ass. He quickly put on a condom, then brutally choked me, jerked my head back, and entered me.

The pain shot through me like a thousand knives, I gasped for air and tried to hold on or support myself somehow. It was in vain. My hands kept slipping. He started moving. Fast. Hard. The slapping against my ass became louder and Ben made growling noises as he thrust again and again.

I wanted him to destroy me. As painful as it was, I wanted him to tear me to pieces. I made choking sounds, his grip on my neck was too tight. My legs were about to give out, but he held me so tightly with his strong hands that I couldn't go anywhere. And even when a stray tear trickled down my cheek, I was unable to interpret it as my body's cry for help.

Ben fucked me into unconsciousness.

And I let him.

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“Lu!” The voice seemed far away. “Lu! Wake up! Bloody hell! Lu!”

I blinked. It was still dark. I recognized Clarissa above me. Judging by the look on

her face, she was completely beside herself. She was fumbling with me. If I wasn't mistaken, she was pulling up my pants. Only then did I realize that I was incredibly cold. My limbs were stiff, my breathing shallow. The night was freezing, and I was lying in something wet.

"Come on, up you go!" Clarissa pulled my arm over her shoulder and tried to get me to stand up.

But I couldn't.

"Steven!" she screeched close to my ear. "Steven! Come here!"

I was still so drunk that a smile even crossed my lips. My head tipped to the side, and I fell back into the mud.

"Oh, shit!" It was Steven, and soon I was lifted into a vertical position.

I caught a whiff of Steven's marijuana scent and felt my feet dragging on the ground. Every part of me ached, and the cold had penetrated deep into my bones—only the pain in my rear burned like a hot thorn.

As soon as I stepped inside the house, a comforting warmth enveloped me and my skin began to burn. I could hear music from afar as they took me into Clarissa's room and onto the couch.

After they undressed me, Clarissa turned to Steven. "Get a blanket!"

Shortly afterward, he returned with an old army blanket. I shivered as he wrapped the blanket around me and rubbed my arms.

"Lu! Look at me! Who was that?" Clarissa knelt on the floor in front of me and

searched my gaze. Her pitiful expression was hard to bear. I let myself fall sideways into a pillow and fell asleep immediately.

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When I woke up, my head was pounding and my mouth was so dry I could barely swallow. I was naked, wrapped in several blankets and lying on the couch in Clarissa's room. My body ached with the heaviness of that night and my ass hurt terribly. Clarissa's bed was empty. There was a pile of fresh clothes and a bath towel on the small table in front of me. I got up and went into the bathroom. I had never appreciated the fact that Clarissa had her own shower as much as I did at that moment.

When I looked in the mirror, I was shocked—I had bruises on my neck and a cut on my cheek. That asshole, I thought and got into the shower. As I washed my ass and blood trickled down my legs, my breath caught in my throat. Bloody hell! I had to lean against the wall for a moment, the memories of last night rushing back so vividly. Despite all the alcohol, the images were now catching up with me mercilessly and I was struggling not to let them overwhelm me.

Despite the hot water, the cold was still in my bones when I had finished showering. I rubbed my hair dry and stared at the clothes I had laid out. They were my own. Not the ones I'd worn the night before, though.

Oh no ...

My premonition was confirmed when I entered the kitchen: Clarissa and Martin were sitting there with a cup of coffee, talking quietly.

I was too tired to pretend nothing had happened. I stood in the doorway for a moment, annoyed by their worried looks, but in the end, I was glad that Clarissa and

Steven's parents weren't there too. I knew what kind of image I presented and, knowing Clarissa's mother, it wouldn't have taken a day for my parents to find out.

It could be worse. Relax.

I retrieved a glass and filled it with tap water. Standing still for a moment, I took a sip and glanced at the clock on the wall. It was just before midday. When I turned back to the others, Clarissa jumped up and hurried out. Steven was probably still in a deep sleep. Martin pushed the empty cup aside and cast a worried glance in my direction. I was surprised that he didn't say anything.

Clarissa returned to the kitchen with a bandage in her hand. She came straight toward me, blocking my path and making it impossible for me to keep my distance. The sudden closeness made me more than uncomfortable.

"It's better if we cover this," she said, pointing to my cheek.

The cut wasn't particularly deep, but I stood still and let her do it.

"How did this happen?" she asked, discarding the leftover paper in the bin.

"Honestly, I don't even know..." I replied casually. And it was the truth—I had no idea. However, I wouldn't have been shocked if Ben had found it necessary to brand me that way.

That motherfucker!

Martin stood up and took a plastic bag from the floor, which contained my clothes from last night. My damp coat was hanging over the chair.

"Please take the blanket Steven gave you," Clarissa said.

“Nonsense. I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not fine,” Martin contradicted. “You have a fever. Take the blanket!”

Clarissa rushed outside and retreated with the army blanket. She delicately draped it around me, evoking a sense of vulnerability like a small, dependent child. I resisted the emotions with all my strength, clutching the blanket tightly around me as I followed Martin out to the bus stop.

The journey home lasted half an hour. I stared blankly at the back of the seat in front of me, attempting to tune out the pain that intensified with each bump of the bus. I cherished every moment of tranquility and calm.

Tears threatened to well up inside me. Part of me yearned to retreat into solitude, yet I also longed for Martin's presence, knowing his mere proximity offered solace and support during that moment of vulnerability.

A true friend ...

When our stop came, I fought my way out into the cold and shuffled home alongside Martin. Although I still had the blanket wrapped tightly around me, I was shivering. It felt like I had slept in a tub of ice water all night. My fingers twitched with the desire to smoke, but all my cigarettes were soaked.

“I was really hoping you got it under control this year,” Martin said, catching me off guard.

His words surprised me so much that I jumped and almost slipped on the wet floor. But before my pain and despair could take over, I abruptly pushed him away and glared at him. “Stop it! Everything is all right.”

“All right! Everything is all right. That’s all I hear from you. Don't you care what happened last night? Are you even aware of what happened to you?”

I rushed into the house and gathered all my energy as I climbed the stairs to the fifth floor. It felt like I had concrete blocks on my feet. Martin was close behind me. He caught up with me on the third floor and blocked my way. “Who was it?”

“Does it matter?” I asked, squeezing past him. Every fiber of my being screamed with desperation, yet I couldn’t succumb to it. I needed to reach my room, and collapsing on the stairs was not an option. Despite my inner turmoil, I pushed forward, taking two steps at a time.

“That bastard got you ...”

Before he could continue, I spun around. “I wanted it, okay? I ... I needed it!”

Martin stared at me with wide eyes. “Lu, you were bleeding!”

I turned away from him and kept walking.

“So, was it worth it?” he called after me. “Do you feel better now? You’ve got strangulation marks on your neck! A cut on your cheek! He ... no ... you let him ... rape you! Jesus Christ! Lu! You have to report him!”

I found it difficult to breathe and I was sure it wasn’t because of all the stairs. Something was closing in my throat and a piercing shrill rang in my head. When I finally reached the top floor, I pushed open the door and staggered into the apartment.

Jonah

With my head pounding, I shuffled into the kitchen, desperate for water. I greedily gulped down a glass of tap water and poured another, vowing never to drink alcohol again. The clock was already past twelve. I had slept through the whole morning, but the night with my friends had been worth it. After I finally managed to distract myself from the confusion surrounding Lucien, I had a lot of fun and even chatted with a few women.

I hadn't realized I had a knack for flirting—yet Oliver had remarked that he could learn a thing or two from me. I hadn't even felt like I was doing anything out of the ordinary. I was just being myself. Certainly, I couldn't deny that alcohol had aided in loosening me up. Moreover, my dialect appeared to serve as an icebreaker; the moment I spoke, it was apparent to everyone that I wasn't local—a perfect conversation starter. Well, come to think of it, the women were the ones who initially broke the ice. All I'd managed to do was draw attention to myself with some casual comments. But it was really fun. It also boosted my self-esteem because I couldn't help but notice the looks the women gave me. They looked at me like ...

Lu.

But it feels different with him somehow.

And the carousel of thoughts picked up speed again. Shame and guilt surged within me. Yes, I enjoyed the attention. Yet, it held no significance for me.

I set the empty glass down on the counter and returned to my room. Exhausted, I fell into bed and crawled back under the covers. I didn't want to think about Lu. Thinking about him exhausted me and left me at a loss. Ever since we'd had sex, I kept seeing him in front of me, with his naked upper body and such a mesmerizing smile that I wondered where this Lu had gone. At dinner a week ago, he seemed completely off.

I wondered what this anniversary is all about.

That's when I heard the front door. Half asleep, I had seen Martin leave the apartment. Apparently, as he often did, he hadn't locked the door. A draft came in from the stairwell and slightly opened my ajar bedroom door. I lay there motionless and stared at the gap that, despite my willpower, didn't get smaller on its own.

"Hey, did you hear me?" shouted Martin.

"I told you I wanted it that way!" Lucien replied emphatically.

What's going on here?

"Nonsense! Someone like that should be locked up!"

"You didn't have to come."

They walked past my room and into the kitchen.

"She called me completely upset! You should be happy that she found you, otherwise you would have frozen to death! Are you going to do this shit every year now?"



“What else am I supposed to do, damn it!” Lucien replied desperately.

“I told you, my door is open!”

“I’m... I’m fine.”

“Don’t kid yourself! Your hands are still shaking. Sit down! I’ll make you some tea.”

Chairs scraped against the floor, and it was quiet for a while. I sat up and listened. The sound of the kettle emanated from the kitchen, and shortly afterward, someone—probably Martin—set cups on the table.

“How did you end up there anyway?” Martin asked calmly.

“Can’t we talk about something else?” Lucien’s voice was barely audible.

“No, we can’t. Have you looked at yourself in the mirror lately?”

Lu remained silent.

“If not the police, at least do me a favor and get tested, okay?”

“That’s not necessary,” Lucien muttered.

What the hell ...?

It had been three weeks since I’d hurt Lucien like that. Most of that time, I had been preoccupied with self-flagellation and insomnia—and, naturally, avoiding Lucien. That night when we’d eaten spaghetti, I hadn’t noticed the tense atmosphere until it escalated, and since then, I’d been struggling to get my head around the painful fact that it wasn’t about me at all.

Martin's bossy tone was new to me. I had never encountered him in that manner before. And yet, his actions toward Lucien were nothing but caring. A cold shiver ran down my spine and I wondered how close the two of them really were. I cautiously pulled the door open and quietly stepped out into the hallway. I hesitantly entered the quiet kitchen. Martin had moved his chair to the head of the table, one hand on his cup, the other on Lucien's shoulder. Lucien had his elbows propped up, with his forehead in both hands as he stared at the table. He had never looked so fragile and vulnerable. There was also a Band-Aid on his cheek. And even though he was wrapped in a gray army blanket, I could see his whole body shaking.

Is he crying? What had happened?

I stood there, shaken, pondering if Lucien had intended for me to witness him in such a state. Martin noticed my bewilderment and, with a slow shake of his head, conveyed that this was likely not the case. I retreated to my room in silence.

Shit ...

Whatever had happened, I could have avoided it; I was sure of it. The way Lucien appeared in the bar that evening, I shouldn't have hesitated; I should have taken him home immediately. The way Martin behaved also bothered me. He was my guardian and had been like a big brother to me since we were small children. How could he just send me away like that now?

My microcosm was destroyed, and I felt trapped in my room. And suddenly, I realized how incredibly empty it actually was.

Nothing but an empty white room.

I remembered the crosses I'd seen at the thrift store, but I didn't regret not buying one.

The white walls resembled projection screens, and Lucien seemed to have claimed them for himself. His presence permeated every inch of the space, even though he wasn't physically there. And yet not there. Instead, someone else was sitting at the kitchen table.

What if he's not as strong as I thought?

The thoughts in my head raced faster and faster, and I could feel the pressure mounting around me. Perplexed, I stood by the window and observed the snow-cleared street below. With the temperature still above freezing, my lungs could have easily handled a sprint to the lake.

All of a sudden, I heard noises from the kitchen again. A chair was moved and soft music started playing. Shortly afterward, there was a knock on my door. Martin came in and greeted me with a bitter smile.

"What happened?"

He shook his head. "Are you hungry?"

Disappointed, I looked down and nodded.

"We could order pizza."

The thought of sitting at the same table with Lucien and eating pizza made me uncomfortable. I had seen him with the woman and hadn't said anything. This secret alone made me feel like I had sinned again. Simultaneously, my stomach tingled with anticipation—I could hardly wait to see Lucien again. Even if he didn't give me a glance, I just wanted to look at him. I wanted to look into his green eyes and somehow draw his attention to me.

Maybe I can engage him in conversation? He can't ignore me forever ... can he?

"Is everything all right?" Martin asked, snapping me out of my thoughts. "You look like you've got something on your mind."

I immediately shook my head. "No, everything's fine. Pizza sounds great." Mentioning that I had seen Lucien in the bar wouldn't have changed the situation. In fact, I was just relieved that he was in his room. Gathering myself, I headed to the kitchen to set the table while Martin ordered pizza delivery. After that, I lay back on my bed to read. Soon, the doorbell rang, and when I came back into the kitchen, there were two pizza boxes on the table.

"Do you want me to get Lu?"

"No, don't bother," Martin said, opening the boxes. "This one has ham and this one has vegetables. Help yourself."

I looked worriedly at Lucien's door.

Maybe another time.

### Jonah

Although Lucien disappeared again on Saturday evening, he at least appeared at home more often after that—albeit only late in the evening. Half asleep, I could hear the front door and his mumbling as he stumbled over the threshold. But he disappeared again in the morning, like a thief in the night, without leaving a trace.

When I came out of the bathroom on Wednesday morning and almost collided with him, my heart almost stopped. With only a bath towel around my waist and my hair dripping, I stood looking at him as if Jesus Christ had appeared to me. Lu was obviously just as surprised, standing with his back against the closed door of his room and would certainly have backed away even further if it had been open. His hair was disheveled and he still had a small Band-Aid on his cheek. Were those bruises on his neck? His green eyes sparkled as he lowered his gaze slightly, still looking at me like an animal on the lookout.

None of us could say a word. I held my bath towel and stared at Lu. My heart was pounding like crazy in my chest.

It was only when his gaze wandered over my naked upper body that I realized I was almost naked. Feeling embarrassed, I brushed back my wet hair, though I didn't think it made the situation any better.

Lucien hastily tightened his scarf, concealing the marks on his neck, and swiftly squeezed past me. As the door to the apartment slammed shut behind him, I was overcome with a sadness that plunged me into a deep hole. I hadn't been prepared for something like this. I rushed to my room, put on some clothes, and replayed the situation I had just experienced in my head, but I couldn't come to a conclusion about how I could have been more open with him.

He appeared so wounded, so utterly fatigued. The way he looked at me, he must have found me repulsive.

Desperate, I began to pray, but it didn't help. Talking to God didn't give me any more strength. On the contrary. The feeling of having been abandoned by God became more present with each passing day, and it hurt. It was dark inside me. I was convinced that God no longer wanted anything to do with me.

I completed the courses and then hid away in my room again. The whole time I sat there apathetically, staring at the white wall. That's how I wanted to be. White and pure. But I was dirty. I was filth.

I twisted my shabby behavior toward Lucien so that I could convince myself that I had done the right thing. Insulting him had finally done something good: I had put him back on the right path—into the arms of a woman. Into a woman's arms. A woman he didn't even love.

Or did he?

No, that couldn't be. I firmly believed he was seeking distraction, even if it was only to satiate his desires. He sought to divert himself and thus irresponsibly allowed himself to be swept away. The physical aspect was merely a means to an end.

Ever since I saw him with that woman, I tried to concentrate on other things. But

Lucien was everywhere. He had gotten into my head and I struggled shutting him out. The question of whether I had been just a toy to him shocked me so much that I was completely off. But it must have been because I couldn't find any other logical explanation as to why Lucien would have done this to me otherwise. This guy had a darkness about him that someone should have warned me about. He probably had fun playing me too.

Let's play a trick on the believer and see how he reacts.

I felt as though I was gradually sinking into the swamp of sin. Confession was no longer an option. No words in the world could compensate for my missteps, as I had crossed far too many lines. No, not me ... this other version of me. And that realization was eating away at me. Something had stirred within me that I struggled to suppress with all my might. I could no longer sleep without satisfying myself first, and no matter how hard I fought against it, thoughts of Lucien persisted in my mind.

How could I repent when I was so full of dirty thoughts? Lu was like an obsession in my head that turned me into an addict. I kept trying to visualize the faces of the women we had partied with, but only the thought of Lucien made me climax.

I was confused.

Frustrated.

No longer understood the world.

Why was it so hard to get away from him?

"Jonah!" Simon's voice disrupted my thoughts.

Confused, I blinked my eyes and found myself in the library again.

“Come on now! It’s closing time,” he said and put my book back on the shelf. “We’re going for a drink.”

The past four weeks of self-flagellation had revealed to me that I was no match for God. It had left me so exhausted that I no longer had the strength to resist anything. While I could still rationalize my shameful actions to myself, I couldn't confront the Almighty. Therefore, I apathetically followed Simon into a bar and ordered a beer—after all, it was Friday.

“What’s going on?” he asked after the second glass. “Problems at home?”

“What? No.”

“Is it your crazy roommate?”

“No!” I replied, perhaps a little too vehemently. “It’s just ... like I’m not even there. I’ve been living there for three months, but they completely shut me out. I have the feeling that I’m no longer wanted there at all, just tolerated. And nobody speaks plain language.”

It felt good to get that off my chest, and in that moment, I was convinced that I had finally uncovered the root of all evil. However deep down, I knew I was only telling half the truth. “Is the offer of the room still on?” I asked.

“Of course it is,” Simon said casually. “You can move in at any time.”

“And your roommates don’t mind?”

“I’m the main tenant. And the two girls have been saying for weeks that I should look for a new roommate because they don’t have the time.”



It wasn't the last beer I drank that evening. Simon didn't even attempt to stop me. He was likely pleased that I had finally opened up and confided in him about my problems. But as drunk as I was in the end, I kept my deepest shame to myself. Besides, I couldn't have articulated everything that had kept me awake for so many nights. Although Simon was obviously very calm about the topic of homosexuality, I couldn't and didn't want to imagine how he would have reacted if I had told him about my night with Lucien. Just the thought of it made my blood boil again.

By the time we left the bar, I was barely able to walk straight. Simon took my arm over his shoulder and walked me home.

"Damn, they should put an elevator in here," he said out of breath when we finally reached the fifth floor. The apartment door opened, and Martin stood in front of us. Apparently, we hadn't been as quiet as I had thought.

"What happened?"

"Beer," Simon replied curtly.

"Ah, come in. This way."

With Simon's help, I stumbled over the threshold and staggered into my room. I dropped into bed like a stone and longed for sleep.

Simon whistled through his teeth. "Wow, he lives like a monk. Well, if that's all his possessions, you can't really call it moving."

"Moving?" Martin asked in surprise.

"Oh, I thought you knew. Hasn't he told you?"

“Does he want to move out? Why? What happened?”

“I don’t know,” Simon replied. “He hasn’t been concentrating for weeks. Haven’t you noticed that? He’s been sleeping through lectures, and he hasn’t shown up at church either.”

Simon cheerfully recounted all my missteps without knowing the true story behind them, while Martin played the unsuspecting one—it seemed impossible that he hadn’t noticed anything.

So, this is it ... my punishment.

Exhausted, I crawled under the covers and turned to face the wall. They could talk about me all they wanted; all I wanted was to sleep.

---

Jonah

Since I failed miserably in my own attempt to become a better person, maybe Martin could punish me for my sins. Simon hadn't minced his words the night before and probably told Martin a lot more than I had realized. This time, I was confident that Martin had informed my parents. Thankfully, I had kept the Lucien matter to myself—otherwise, Simon would have surely divulged it as well.

But what if he had already told Martin everything? Martin and Lucien had a special bond, and although I'd never seen them involved in serious conversations, they were undoubtedly very close. It was almost impossible that Martin didn't know anything.

Crap! I'm as good as dead!

Suddenly, my heart raced, and I felt the urge to get out. Put on my running shoes, start running, and relieve the pressure. However, I remained seated at the kitchen table, nervously tapping my leg and gazing at Warhol's gun poster on the wall. The black and red print reminded me that art had once been part of my life ... not so long ago, actually. It made me feel guilty, because although I had felt completely out of place every time, I had somehow enjoyed the gallery visits and openings.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Steven's voice came from behind me. He had briefly stopped by to discuss something with Martin.

Using a knife, Martin retrieved a key from his waistband and handed it to Steven.  
“Yes. Unfortunately, it’s absolutely necessary,”

“He will freak out.”

“That’s okay. But we can’t just stand by and do nothing.”

I didn’t know what it was about, but I was almost certain they were talking about Lucien.

“All right,” Steven said, pocketing the key. “I’ll call you later.”

“Thanks. And stay tough.”

“Of course. I’ll see you soon. Bye, Jonah!”

I said goodbye to him with a nervous nod and then Steven was out the door. Martin put a cup of tea down for me. “So, what happened?” he asked in a calm voice and poured himself some tea. “Why do you want to leave here?”

I held the cup tightly between my hands, watching intently as the tea bag submerged in the hot water. Not a single word could escape my lips.

“I thought you felt comfortable here?” Martin continued, taking Lucien’s seat. “You’ll have to give your parents a good reason; otherwise, they won’t allow it. After all, they pay the rent. But if you can’t even communicate to me what the problem is, your only option will be to finally settle into your room—because then you won’t have anywhere else to go. Unless you get a job and pay the rent yourself. But let me tell you: You’re in a pretty privileged position.” He lifted the tea bag from the cup, wrapped it around a spoon, and stowed it away.

“Are you still praying?” I asked softly.

“Why do you ask?”

“I pray, but it’s no use,” I said dejectedly. “I tried so hard, but nothing positive came out of it. Maybe it would be better if I came back home and worked on the farm. Obviously, I failed here in Zurich.”

Martin furrowed his brows again, as if he hadn’t understood what I’d said. Then he burst out laughing. “Do you really think praying will solve your problems? Honestly? By the time you go home for Christmas at the weekend, you’ll realize that the world doesn’t give you anything anymore. All rules and commandments, all taboos and renunciations. They don’t make you a better person. They are man-made obstacles that merely block your path.”

“You lived there yourself!” I reminded him. “So don’t pretend it was all bad.”

“I’m not saying it was bad.” Martin continued to laugh, which annoyed me. “It wasn’t until I arrived in Zurich that I realized I had been navigating the world with blinders on. But at least you’ve realized something: Praying doesn’t change anything. Open your eyes and observe your surroundings. You’ll then discover what you truly desire. Find the answers within yourself. And believe me, kiddo, no matter what comes out of it, it’s okay.”

Nothing is okay! If only you knew ...

As if that was the end of the conversation, Martin took a magazine from the pile and flipped it open.

I stared at the shredded page. “I feel like you’re shutting me out.”

“Nonsense! You’re just imagining it,” he replied while calmly turning the pages. “It’s a difficult time right now.”

“I’m not imagining it! Otherwise, you would have let me in on it,” I replied forcefully. “What was that anniversary?”

“Why do you want to know?” Martin asked, glancing up in surprise.

“It ... seems important,” I mumbled.

He pushed the magazine aside and held his cup with both hands. After looking out the window for some time, his voice took on a serious tone. “Two years ago, Marco celebrated his birthday in a cabin in the woods. It was completely crazy. Everyone was totally drunk. We were dancing on the tables. And when the alcohol ran out, Lu agreed to get some more.”

“He was there by car?” I asked, surprised.

“No, his friend Phil owned a car—an old Subaru. Phil didn’t drink alcohol at all, and since a gas station was still open two miles away, they set off.” Martin turned the cup thoughtfully between his hands, took a sip, and put it down again. “Well...” he continued hesitantly. “When they still hadn’t returned after two hours, I tried to reach Phil on his cell phone. I was surprised to hear the voice of a nurse I knew from the emergency room. He told me to get here as soon as possible. Something had happened, so I called a cab and set off.

I found Lu in the emergency waiting room. He sat alone in a corner, staring at his bloody, shaking hands. I joined him and asked what happened, but he was so shocked that he didn't even acknowledge my presence. I felt surprised and angered by the fact that they had left him alone in such a condition. I fetched a wet cloth and cleaned his hands. After a while, he began to regain consciousness.

‘A truck,’ he said in a quivering voice. ‘It came out of nowhere.’

‘Where’s Phil?’ I asked.

Lu clenched his hands into fists, suppressing his tears. ‘With my father on the operating table. When we got here, he was on break but immediately took care of Phil.’

He seemed unharmed, only his sleeves were covered in blood. And from the look of his hands, he had tried to stop any bleeding on the spot.

‘You did everything you could,’ I told him. I wasn’t even sure if he heard me, but I stayed with him.

When Lu’s father came out of the operating room, daylight was already breaking outside. Lu jumped up full of hope, but his father narrowed his eyes. ‘He didn’t make it,’ he said. ‘If you hadn’t put off your studies for so long and wasted your time in Asia, you would have known what to do and could have saved him. Then he just left Lu and went to Phil’s parents, who just arrived at the door.’” Martin turned his head and looked bitterly out of the window.

A snowstorm swept over Zurich, painting the sky in a silvery gray hue. I could scarcely believe what I had just heard. His father’s words seared into my memory, leaving me unable to fathom what they must have done to Lu.

“Lu was destroyed,” Martin continued, “you can imagine. He hid in his room for days. He stopped going to lectures and didn’t do anything else for university. He skipped his exams and announced to the whole family at Christmas that he was quitting his medical studies and going into art.

“When I returned to the apartment after New Year, Lu had been drinking for almost a

week. Empty bottles littered the space, and the apartment reeked like a smoker's den. I only learned the full extent of what had happened two weeks later when Lu had somewhat recovered. His father had ejected him on Christmas Eve, declaring he wanted nothing more to do with him. I tried to reassure Lu, saying that it was probably just something he'd said and that his father wouldn't be angry forever. But I was wrong. The next month, Lu's money was cut off. He was fortunate to have some savings tucked away, which sustained him for the next three months. However, as time went on, finances became tight. We discussed potential avenues for securing funds, and his ideas were ... let's just say, alarming. So I was delighted when he arrived and told me that he had sold two paintings."

Martin shook his head in disbelief and cleared his throat. "To this day, he blames himself for Phil's death and can't even pronounce his name. The accident has profoundly altered Lu. Last year, on the anniversary, he was completely distraught. We hoped he would fare better this year, but evidently, we were mistaken. I apologize, Jonah. I should have informed you sooner. Perhaps then you would have comprehended him more and wouldn't be considering moving out now. I understand Lu can be draining, but he's truly a wonderful person."

"Maybe," I replied and hung my head. My chest painfully tightened as I thought about how mean I'd been to Lucien. I had no idea how I was going to make it up to him. An apology would hardly be enough.



Lucien

Nothing I put on screen was the least bit good, so I saved myself the trouble and didn't do it at all. But because I had to relieve the pressure inside me somehow, I wrote ... sometimes obsessively. By now, there were sheets of paper all over the place, which I had tried to put into words what was going on in my head.

A week had passed since the incident with Ben, but I still hadn't really got back on my feet. It was as if that night had blocked all the channels in my body, leaving me devoid of energy. The bruises on my neck were now a slight green tinge with purple edges, my eyes were swollen, and a war was raging in my head. I had lost my appetite and had only been drinking beer and eating protein bars for days. I was also starting to feel like smoking was turning me into an asthmatic.

For two days, I did nothing except toss and turn on the sofa. I found myself in an in-between state, unable to sleep yet somehow losing track of time. Each time I glanced at the clock, several hours had slipped by, which brought me some relief. Life had become unbearable, and with Christmas just around the corner, all I wanted to do was throw myself off a cliff.

A soft noise woke me from my sleep, and I turned to the side. I slowly opened my eyes and was blinded by a lamp on the floor next to a picture I had started.

I didn't even turn it on.

The sweet smell of grass caught my nose. I blinked and let my gaze drift aimlessly around the room. Steven was sitting at the table, one leg crossed over the other, reading one of my handwritten notes and taking a pleasurable drag on his joint.

“Put that down,” I grumbled.

He turned his head and smiled—at least, that's what it appeared to be from sixteen feet away.

“So that's what I call literature!” Steven declared. He read the note in an energetic tone.

“Open your mouth

Lick me

Turn around

Bend over

I'll fuck you

Nng

Mmh

Ahh”

Once he finished reading it, he put the sheet back on the table and shook his head in

amusement. “Are you planning on hanging that up?”

I stayed put and didn’t move. My gaze wandered to the upper windows. It was a gloomy day, and it was snowing outside. “How did you get in here?” I was sure I had locked the door.

“Martin gave me the key.”

“Why?”

“The anniversary was two weeks ago. And since you obviously can’t extricate yourself from this mess—as evidenced by this rubbish here—I’m here. Intervention, my dear friend.”

“How pathetic.”

“Not as pathetic as you,” Steven said, stepping closer. “Get up! We’re going out.”

“Forget it. It’s fucking freezing outside.”

“Don’t argue with me. It’ll do you good.”

“I want to keep working,” I lied, looking at the picture on the floor.

“That looks finished to me,” Steven said, tossing me my coat. “Come on, let’s go!”

Oh boy ...

I slowly got to my feet and sat down. Everything still hurt, and I felt like I was an exposed nerve. Nevertheless, I complied with Steven. Most likely because I lacked the energy to argue with him. I slipped into my coat, put on my scarf and shoes, and

packed my cigarettes.

The fresh air revived my mood and my circulation got going again. It was damp and wet, so the snow didn't last long and turned into brown slush on the road. The sky was slate gray and even though it was just after midday, it was darker than it had been in a long time.

Just my kind of weather ...

We set off in silence. I thought Steven just wanted to go for a walk, but he headed straight for the nearest bus stop.

“Where are we going?”

“You'll see.”

The bus came and Steven had me sit by the window. He probably wanted to make sure I didn't wander off anywhere. I didn't understand his intentions for a while. It wasn't until we approached the cemetery on foot that I realized what this was all about.

That bastard!

We even got off the bus one stop early!

“No,” I said, stubbornly standing still and shaking my head.

“Oh yes,” he objected and took my arm.

I backed away. “Please, Steven. I can't.”

“You’re coming with me now, or I’ll drag you in there! You’re so weak that it wouldn’t be a problem for me.”

I grimaced, bit my lip, and stared at the old wrought iron gate as if it were the entrance to hell.

“When was the last time you were here?”

I ran my hand nervously over my mouth. “I don’t know ... two years ago?”

“So just after the funeral,” Steven concluded. “Then it’s high time you finally got this over with.” He seized my arm again and led me in with an iron grip.

My heart was racing and, despite the icy cold, I started to sweat and could hardly breathe. My body was as stiff as a board. Only my legs did what they needed to do to move me forward.

We crossed half the cemetery until we reached the part where the grave was. I hesitated to walk down the small path, and Steven didn’t push me anymore. My heart was racing. Finally, I took a deep breath, pushed my hands deep into my coat pockets, and strolled with my head down. I knew exactly where his grave was. As if I had walked the narrow path over the stone slabs a hundred times before, the place was burned into my memory. And then I suddenly stood in front of his gravestone for the first time, surrounded by other ones. Two years ago, just after the funeral, there was only a wooden cross. It was a beautiful stone that stood out with its dark grain and unusual shape. When I read his full name, my heart stopped for a few beats, and I turned away. I stood there paralyzed, staring across the graves, while the wind made the leaves on a tree swirl. My face felt numb, and there was this strong pulsation deep inside me. It felt as if the entire world was screaming at me: Get out of here!

“Let’s go,” I said curtly, turning away from the grave.

“Not so fast.” Steven grabbed my arm again. “Say something!”

I squirmed in his grip, but I needed my strength to keep my emotions at bay rather than being able to break away. I turned my back to Steven and tried to collect myself.

“Like what? There’s nothing to say.”

“Say his name.”

“What?”

“Say. His. Name,” he repeated.

I thought he was joking, but Steven was serious. Suddenly, it felt as if an alien force was squeezing my heart like a sponge. “Please, Steven, don’t make me do this.”

“Yes, I will. Tell him!”

Every fiber of my being resisted, and a sinking feeling spread through my stomach. Just standing in front of his grave killed me. With all my strength, I tore myself away from Steven, but he grasped my arm again and held me tight.

“You lay bleeding and half-naked in my yard after the party, damn it!” he hissed. “And all because of him! So say his name, for fuck’s sake!”

I tried unsuccessfully to get away from him until I finally gave up and hung my head. The blood rushed through my body, and my pulse pounded loudly in my skull. I wiped my eyes and winced. The pain that welled up inside me threatened to overwhelm me. But I held myself upright and looked at the name on the dark stone.

“Phil,” I whispered and wiped my eyes again. I felt sick for a moment and pressed my

lips together.

“Again!”

“Phil.”

“And now forgive yourself!”

“No. It was my idea to go to the gas station.”

“This is nonsense. It was our idea. But if anyone is to blame, it’s the truck driver.”

“But I ...”

“No, Lu! It's time you finally forgive yourself. It was not your fault!”

My whole body was shaking. I felt dizzy and clung to Steven as if he were the only one who could keep me from collapsing.

“Do you understand me? It. Wasn’t. Your. Fault.”

The words gradually got through to me and I nodded slightly. Even though I couldn't believe it, I felt a weight lift off my shoulders. Despite not believing it, a sense of relief washed over me. Steven let go of me and took a step back.

“I’ll ... be right up ahead if you need me.” Steven turned around, leaving me alone.

I stood there for a while, attempting to sort through the myriad thoughts piling up like mountains of garbage in my head and kept repeating Steven’s words over and over again: “Not your fault.”

I'm so sorry, Phil.

With my sleeve, I wiped the tears from my face and tried to keep my composure. But just as I thought I'd finally collected myself, Jonah crept into my thoughts and disrupted everything once more. The memory of our night together surged within me, and the feelings I had been struggling to suppress since then broke through all barriers like a tidal wave, compelling me to crouch down and cover my face.

Shit, man ...

I could no longer avoid admitting to myself that I had fallen in love with Jonah. I thought about him the whole time. He was everywhere. He was my buoy, keeping me afloat while Phil threatened to drag me under like an anchor.

But even though I had shown Jonah the possibilities of what kind of world he could dive into, I couldn't get my hopes up. Unless he allowed himself to be dissuaded from his religious beliefs, he would never take the step of opening up to his true self.

And that hurt incredibly.

It took me a long time to pick myself up, take a deep breath, and say goodbye to Phil. Steven was waiting on a bench and got up as soon as he saw me coming.

"Are you all right?" he asked, rubbing his arms.

I bit my lower lip and nodded cautiously.

"They're always open here," Steven said with a grin on his face. "So if you feel like it, you can come here any time. They really do let anyone in here. It's a great place."

I struggled to force a smile. "It's not just him."



“What do you mean?”

“I ... met someone.”

“What? And why are you only telling me this now?”

“Because it doesn’t matter. He doesn’t want to know about me.”

Steven sighed. “I’m sorry, man. Shall we go for a coffee?”

By now I was also feeling cold and was glad about the suggestion. As soon as we had left the cemetery, Steven pulled out the tobacco. “Oh, by the way,” he said as he crushed the weed in his hand. “You’re celebrating Christmas with us.”

“What? But your parents ...”

“They’re surprised at how stubborn your old man is about kicking you out. And Clarissa has also spoken up for you. So they agree—on one condition: stop drinking. It’s not good for you. I mean, I’m not passing judgment on your poems, but have you ever looked at the painting that’s lying on the floor in your studio?”

“Yes. It sucks, I know,” I replied dryly.

He laughed with relief. “I’m glad you think so too.”

For the first time in weeks, I felt like I could breathe again and had some hope of getting back on track, even if it would take a while.

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### Jonah

Since I've had the feeling of withdrawing in the last few days anyway, the quiet country life was just right for me. Christmas with my family distracted me from my worries and I even found some peace during midnight Mass. Unfortunately, the contemplative time passed far too quickly.

Just two days later, the silence was like torture, and Martin's words echoed in my head. The world outside felt like a tight jacket that I squeezed into every morning out of sheer politeness. The peace that I had initially longed for, which I had thought I would find in familiar rules and commandments, now made me irritable and nervous. My thoughts were louder than ever, and Jesus was hanging on the wall in almost every room, watching me with suspicious eyes. I was sure he was mocking me as I desperately tried to stay in control. In vain. My dirty imagination collided full steam ahead with all the taboos and renunciations that existed in this world. Lucien was everywhere: in my head, in my heart ... in my whole body. As I thought back to our night together, I could even feel him inside me—moving slowly and touching me.

Oh my God!

How presumptuous of me to allow myself to be fooled into thinking that his breakdown had nothing to do with me. Although I now knew the story with Phil, I was certain that this couldn't have been the sole reason for Lucien's peculiar

behavior. I must have been partly responsible.

The last time we met in the hallway, as I had just stepped out of the shower, he had appeared so worn out. Somehow sickly. And what had those bruises on his neck been about? Had he been strangled?

I hadn't had the chance to ask Martin what had transpired on that night when I failed to prevent Lucien from going out with that woman, but Martin's words still resonated in my mind, echoing from the kitchen into my room: "Otherwise you would have frozen to death."

Something terrible must have happened. And I felt so guilty because I could have prevented it. But the worst thing was that I felt sorry for Lucien, even though he repeatedly made it clear to those around him that this was exactly what he didn't want. Maybe he didn't think he deserved it, as he seemed to want to punish himself for Phil's death.

Maybe we're more alike than I thought.

That's enough. Get rid of your thoughts! Enough of Lucien!

He didn't deserve my pity. As shabby as I had behaved toward him, I had every reason to be angry with him. If it hadn't been for him, I would never have crossed that line. He hadn't just stolen my first kiss and he hadn't just blown me. He was also the first person in my life I'd ever had sex with! All things I was planning to do with my future wife! With a woman, I would have loved to meet in church. It wasn't just a dream I was chasing. It had been my plan! A plan that might have given me the opportunity to take a different path after my studies than going back to the farm.

But Lucien had destroyed that dream and I hated him for it. And yet he kept popping up in my mind, tenderly stroking my cheek and giving me a kiss. And as if that

wasn't enough, my thoughts went particularly crazy before I fell asleep. I imagined him coming into my room at night, crawling under my blanket, and snuggling up to me naked from behind. His warmth flowed through my body, and his breath on my neck gave me goose bumps. Then he ran his hand over my back, down to my stomach, continuing further downwards. The lust in me awoke, jolting me upright as if startled by a nightmare. I let out a moan and rolled onto my other side, plagued by stomach cramps. I felt like a horny teenager who had lost all control over his body. At home in Zurich, I had satisfied myself God knows how often with thoughts of Lucien. But now I was at my parents' house! It wasn't too much to ask for a little self-control.

But no matter how hard I tried, just before the New Year, I could no longer shake off the impure thoughts. They heated me up so much that I lost all control. I imagined Lucien massaging my penis until it was rock hard. In my fantasy, he pressed himself against me from behind so that I could feel his cock between my buttocks. The thought turned me on so much that I started to massage my hole, carefully slipped a finger inside and imagined it was Lucien. How he pressed himself against me and took me from behind in a dominant way. How he punished me for my dirty thoughts ...

The orgasm was followed by the familiar torture. Completely confused by the emotional chaos, I wanted to cry and crawl under the covers in shame. And as if that wasn't enough, the dinner conversations with my parents got more and more awkward every day.

“Have you met Barbara's daughter now?” my mother asked again and again.

Ever since she had introduced Laura to me with a hopeful look at the Christmas fair, she had been eagerly waiting for me to initiate a meeting.

“She's such a nice girl,” my mother reminded me, handing me the potatoes. “Wouldn't it be nice to go out with her?”

I remained silent and filled my plate despite losing my appetite again. Barbara was a friend of my mother—they had known each other since childhood—and I knew that if Laura and I got married, it would be a dream come true for both of them.

“You should listen to your mother,” my father interjected in response to my silence. “Laura has started training as a farmer. That’s exactly what you’ll need when you take over the farm.”

“What if I don’t want to take over the farm?” I asked cautiously.

Irritated silence followed.

“What do you mean?” my mother asked.

“I ... don’t know,” I lied. “I was just thinking out loud.” Grumpily, I poked at my food.

“You’d make me very proud if you took over the farm. You know that,” my father grumbled. “Unfortunately, you’re not lucky enough to have siblings like Martin.”

“What is it that you don’t like about Laura?” my mother inquired. “Or ... do you have a girlfriend in Zurich?”

Oh boy ...

“Jonah?” my mother probed. “Have you met someone?” Her cheeks flushed with excitement.

“Yes, I’ve met someone,” I replied with difficulty.

Is that a lie? Jesus Christ! Forgive me!

“Oh, how nice!” my mother rejoiced.

“It’s about time,” my father said. “At the regulars’ table, people were already joking about whether you might be a fag. Go ahead and sow your wild oats, boy.”

“Erwin!”

“What? Better a city girl than a faggot.”

My throat tightened, and I bit my lower lip so hard I could taste the blood. The images of the night with Lucien popped into my head and I even heard myself moaning. Loud and full of lust. And then my cock twitched too.

Damn!

How had I gotten so far off track? And why was I making it unnecessarily difficult for myself when everything could be so easy?

Find a woman. Marry her. Have a few kids and my parents will be happy. And I’ll be happy too... definitely. After all, I’m not a faggot.

The next night I lay awake staring at the ceiling. I couldn't get my father's words out of my head, and every time Lucien crept into my thoughts, the internal stress became so great that I clenched my hands into fists so tightly that my fingernails dug painfully into my flesh. I desperately needed something to take my mind off things and make the rest of my vacation with my parents easier. Because no matter how I turned it around, I couldn’t shake the uneasy feeling of wanting to see Lucien.

So I called Daniela.

If there was one woman to consider, it was her.

Of course, I thought carefully about what I wanted to tell her. It had been six weeks since we met on my birthday. Perhaps I should apologize for not getting in touch for so long. Or was it better not to say a word about it and just ask her what was going on in her life? Maybe she was in a relationship now. And if not? Should I ask her out for a coffee or a glass of wine? In the afternoon or in the evening? Or should I perhaps ask Martin for advice first?

Nonsense ... just do it. What could possibly go wrong?

With stiff fingers and a pounding heart, I searched my address book for her number. Her profile picture only showed a snowy landscape, but she was the only Daniela I had saved, so that had to be her number. Hesitantly, I pressed the button and let it ring.

“Hello?”

I swallowed and was paralyzed for a moment. I hadn’t expected her to answer so quickly.

“Um ... hello ... Daniela ... it’s me ... Jonah. It’s been a while, but ...”

“Oh, hello, Jonah! Nice to hear from you! It’s been a while!” She actually sounded pleased to hear my voice, and I felt a great weight lifted from my shoulders. I had expected her to have erased me from her memories a long time ago.

“Yes ... a while ago ...” I stammered awkwardly. “How are you doing?”

“I’m doing great! And you?”

“Yes ... thank you ... everything’s fine. I ... um.” It actually wouldn’t have hurt to make a few notes. “I was ... thinking about you, and ... thought ... I thought ...

maybe you'd like ... a coffee ... with me ..."

My goodness, I'm being ridiculous.

"Yes, that sounds good. I'm up for it. When is convenient for you? I'm in the mountains for a few more days, but I'll be back soon."

"I won't be back in Zurich until Saturday either," I replied, relieved that my voice was no longer shaking.

"Saturday is fine. Shall we meet at the Odeon at 6 pm?"

"Yes!" I replied, almost a little too excitedly. That was easier than I had expected.

"That suits me very well." But then I suddenly found myself at a loss for words again.

Before another awkward silence could ensue, Daniela spoke up again. "It's great that you called. Most people are too good for that now and only write a message at most."

"Well." I tried to sound relaxed. "That seemed kind of inappropriate here."

Daniela laughed. "I'm glad about that. See you on Saturday then!"

"See you then!"

I hung up and took a deep breath. My heart was still racing, and as hot as my head felt, it was probably bright red. But I was also proud of myself. Knowing that I was going to meet her made my time with my parents easier. I looked forward to the date, feeling proud of having taken the chance. My conscience finally recovered to some extent, and I was optimistic. I wanted to do everything better in the new year.

Since I had almost completely banished my inglorious night with Daniela from my



memory—which I had definitely done better than the night with Lucien—the image I had of her was only a blur. But I remembered her long blonde hair, her doe eyes, and her understanding smile the morning after when I had said goodbye in shame. The idea of going out with her and having a nice conversation helped me escape from my overwhelming thoughts, allowing me to sleep peacefully again.

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Jonah

The woman sitting opposite me had a brown bob—the long-haired blonde angel had vanished.

Daniela stroked her new hairstyle. “Nice, isn’t it?”

The sight irritated me so much that I must have stared at her stupidly and only managed a sheepish smile with difficulty.

“I thought you’d deleted my number,” she said teasingly. “It’s been a while.”

“Yes ... No, I haven’t ...” I replied, forcing a quick grin and trying to maintain eye contact.

I nervously picked at a napkin and wondered how I could still feel so embarrassed after all this time. What I had previously been able to suppress now hit me with full force. How I had hung over the toilet bowl at her house and vomited. Naked. After she had unsuccessfully tried to make me hard several times.

Screw eye contact.

“I hope you don’t feel bad about what happened anymore.”

She was kind of right about that. Why, actually? The person I'd experienced that embarrassment with practically didn't even exist anymore. There was no reason for me to feel bad about it. And yet I could feel the blood rushing to my ears. I began to nervously shake my leg.

"Well ... I still hope that I can laugh about it one day," I replied with a weak smile.

Daniela took my hand and gave me a seductive look. "I'd be willing to try it with you again."

I hadn't expected her to get down to business so quickly, and I stared at her with wide eyes.

"I mean, that was your plan, wasn't it? That's why you called me, right?"

"Talk," I replied in a raspy voice, cautiously retracting my hand back and placing it around the cup.

She smiled. "You're sweet. Shall we go to my place? But we can also go to your place if you prefer. Maybe you'll feel more comfortable there."

I looked at her open-mouthed for a moment, then cleared my throat and sat up straight. "I think I made a mistake calling you. I'm sorry. I must have misjudged you."

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "What did you think of me?"

"I thought..." Unsettled, I paused and had to admit to myself that I must have had the wrong idea about Daniela. Although she would have climbed into bed with me on the first night, I had seen her almost like a saint. I wasn't aware that it was the devil's smile trying to seduce me that night. Somehow, facing this fact was scary. I had

hoped that I would be the one to seduce her this time and perhaps soon call her my girlfriend.

“What did you think?” Daniela asked more forcefully.

“You have to understand,” I replied hesitantly. “Before I met you, I believed in abstaining until marriage.”

“You’re sweet.”

“Well, it ... it’s not that I ... feel guilty about it somehow,” I stammered, looking at the teabag in my cup. “I wanted to, although unfortunately ...” I couldn’t think of anything else to say, so I squeezed the teabag on the spoon. I could feel my hands shaking slightly. The conversation was making me nervous.

“Cut to the chase,” she demanded with an endearing tone.

“Well ... I mean ...” I took a sip of tea, scorching my tongue, but was happy about the delay it caused. Nonetheless, I bravely drank half the cup. “To be honest ... I thought that maybe you could have been my girlfriend.”

“But?” Daniela frowned and shot me with a piercing look.

“Well, you don’t seem to care who you get into bed with.”

“Excuse me?”

“No need to get worked up about it.”

“You just indirectly called me a whore!”

“What? No!”

Daniela leaned back and took a deep breath. Her eyes fell on the empty coffee cup. She took a sip of water, which had been served in a small glass. I was surprised at how quickly she calmed down again. At that moment she didn't really seem to care what I said—or didn't say.

“I really feel sorry for you, Jonah.”

Frustrated, I paused and glanced at her over my cup, because I was convinced that should have been my sentence. If anyone deserved pity, it was probably her. Because she was obviously the one who had lost her way.

“I'll overlook the insult and tell you something.”

“What insult?”

“Shut up!” she hissed, slamming her hand flat on the table, causing the crockery to rattle and drawing the attention of the other guests. “I know people like you who are trapped in a system that thinks for them and tells them what's good and what's bad, right and wrong. People who don't even realize how reality works. But there are also those who manage to free themselves from these shackles. As long as you don't free yourself, Jonah, you don't have the right to judge others.”

I looked at her in bewilderment. “But that's not what I said ...”

“I think there's something wrong with you,” she said, shaking her head. “I mean, sure, maybe it was the alcohol. But maybe you just can't get it up with women—you'll be looking for the right one for a long time.”

Her words were like a slap in the face. Heat rose in my head, sending a chill down my

spine.

Is she implying ...? I'm not gay!

I stood up abruptly.

“What’s wrong?” she asked almost indifferently. “Have I hit the nail on the head?”

“No!” I snapped at her. “What does one thing have to do with the other?” Just because I couldn’t get it up with Daniela didn’t mean that I liked men. I didn’t!

“Is that a rhetorical question? When you sit down again, we can talk about it.”

I stared at her indignantly. I didn’t want to talk! There was nothing more for me to say! With a contemptuous snort, I grabbed my jacket and angrily left the café. Outside, an icy wind blew against me, yet the conversation had ignited such a fervor within me that the cold became inconsequential. I walked aimlessly through the city, trying to pinpoint the moment when I had made my first mistake. If I had confessed after Lucien's first kiss, I might have avoided this mess altogether. No, wait! What am I saying? I should have backed off to prevent the kiss from happening in the first place. Or even better, I shouldn't have helped Lucien at all when he came home that night completely drunk and scalded his hand with boiling water. How foolish of me to accompany him to a bar on a Sunday! And as regretful as I was about my behavior, the true gravity of the situation was only beginning to sink in.

How stupid am I really?

It had been me who had walked around the apartment without a shirt on, showing him my naked upper body! And it had been me who had sneaked into Lucien’s room to find comfort there.

No! No! No! It's his fault! Like a virus, he has taken over every cell in my body and confused me so much that I am no longer able to think clearly. He has ruined my life! I will never be able to love a woman without thinking about him!

I had fought so hard to be allowed to study in Zurich. And for what? Only to find myself in a dark hole and realize nothing about me was natural? Even every microorganism was superior to me. They knew what needed to be done—it came naturally to them. Meanwhile, I felt disoriented, unsure of even my bearings, spinning aimlessly in circles, utterly lost.

No, it wasn't my fault. It was Lucien's fault! He had poisoned me and made me ill. Maybe I should have just apologized to him for a little mercy, but it wasn't that simple. After all, he was the one who had avoided me in the six weeks before Christmas.

Well, I couldn't blame him when I had offended and disappointed him, but why should I apologize to him at all when it was God alone who could redeem me from my guilt?

I was utterly bewildered. As the snow fell and icy flakes drifted down onto the street, I felt a chill settle over me. I pulled my hood down over my face and continued walking until the midnight bells began to ring. Finally, I stopped and glanced around, trying to orient myself.

Damn it ... this can't be happening.

I happened to be standing in front of the factory building where Lucien's studio was located.

Jonah

I didn't plan on coming here, but now that I was here, I couldn't and didn't want to carry my anger around any longer. I'm sure Martin had told him when I was coming home after the vacation, so it was unlikely I'd find Lucien there. The only place he could hide away was his studio.

Despite my conviction that I was doing the right thing, I hesitantly descended the stairs to the studio. It was quiet. No music to guide me, just a single flickering neon light in the dark corridor. I stood in front of the door, pushing aside all my doubts and insecurities and remembering why I had entered the building in the first place. I had to make it clear to Lucien once and for all that he had to leave me alone from now on. Without knocking, I opened the door and walked in forcefully.

Several lights were on in the studio. Several lamps were scattered around the room like little torches. Three paintings rested on easels that appeared finished to me, and a large canvas lay on the floor, brightly lit by a studio lamp. Lucien was sitting next to it, concentrating on a detail. He had his headphones on and obviously hadn't even noticed that I had come in. It was only when my shadow fell on the canvas that he stopped and looked up at me.

Overwhelmed by the sight of him, all my good intentions faltered. If I had just been so driven by anger at him, I was now completely silent. He seemed so ... changed.



No more dark circles under his eyes. No longer haggard. No longer pale either. His hair was tousled, but his gaze was clear. He was freshly shaved. Clean. Healthy. And ... beautiful.

I hadn't been prepared for that. My eyes went to the bucket next to the sink. It was empty.

Oh God! Why did I even come here?

Lucien blinked and seemed to gradually emerge from his fantasy world. When he realized who was actually standing in front of him, his expression stiffened. "Go away," he said with a warning undertone.

I stretched my jaw and remembered why I was here. "No!" I replied sternly and straightened my shoulders. "You don't have the right to behave like that!"

Lucien furrowed his brows and pulled the plugs out of his ears. "What are you talking about?" He put the brush down and rose to his feet. The way he pushed his hair back made me weak.

Get a grip and don't let his innocent-looking appearance confuse you now!

"You've ruined my life!" I snapped at him.

"Excuse me?" he asked with a hint of indignation, stepping away from the picture. "I gave you one! Can't you see that?"

"It feels like shit! That's the only thing I can see!"

"Who told you it was painless? Your god?"

“Don’t you dare!” I shouted angrily. “You have no idea!”

“Ha! But you do? You’re a hypocrite, Jonah, and you don’t even realize it. Denying yourself and blaming me and everyone else for it!”

“That’s not true at all! It was you who turned me on! You always just do what you want, regardless of the consequences!”

“Unlike you, I also pay the price! I ...” Startled by his own words, Lucien gasped and slapped his hand over his mouth, then turned away from me and wiped his face.

My mood also changed from one second to the next, and I started shaking. Yes, he paid the price. He had no other choice. Being rejected by his father, and not even because of his sexual orientation, but just because he had dropped out of medical school, had been a damn high price to pay—apart from the fact that he had also lost the love of his life. It was Martin who had stayed by his side for two years—not his family. And certainly not God. I hung my head sadly.

No, I couldn’t comprehend the pain he had to endure at all. But I was sure that he had wished for the same thing back then as I did at that moment. “I just want to feel good again.” The pleading in my voice disgusted me, but it was true. Feeling good again was all I wanted.

Lucien was still standing with his back to me, so I approached him. He didn’t look up. Even worse. He turned his head away and clenched his hands into fists. And all at once, I realized what it all meant: Lucien was the only one who had the ability to make me feel better.

He was the one who loosened my chains and showed me that I was actually free. Every fiber of my body was longing to finally let go and let him take control.

Do something!

But he did nothing, just looked at the floor, probably wondering what I had lost in his studio. I asked myself the same question.

Why did I come here? What do I even want here? What do I want from him?

As soon as I realized where I was, I should have turned on my heel and left as quickly as possible. Instead, I stood there transfixed, still not understanding why I felt so miserable. Never before had I been plagued by such self-doubt. I was shocked. Not only had my worldview been shaken, but my faith in God had also been affected. Hadn't I been a good Christian? What had I done to deserve this? Had Daniela and Martin been right all along, and had I truly been stumbling through a world bound and blindfolded, not meant for me? And wasn't Lucien's comment just something I said? Could I be the one to blame for everything?

There it was again, that dark cloud that enveloped him. I had brought it upon him, and he had draped it around himself like a cloak. It hurt me to witness his state. His laughter had eluded me for weeks, and the memory of his bright green eyes had begun to fade.

Look at me!

But he avoided that too.

Something inside me broke.

What if he never looked at me again? What if I disappear now and never see him again?

Panic spread through me. There was no way that was going to happen! And yet I felt

so powerless.

Lucien's words echoed in my mind when he tried to convince me to choose him after sex— You are choosing something that doesn't exist .

All of a sudden, the scales fell from my eyes. What an idiot I'd been to put Lucien behind someone I'd never met. Behind God. After all, I wanted to discover new things and leave the strict faith of my parents' house behind. Stunned, I expelled the air and stroked my hair. "Lu, I'm sorry," I whispered, ashamed.

Lucien didn't move, so I gathered up all my courage and took a step toward him.

"You should leave," he said without looking at me.

"You're kicking me out?"

"You can blame me for that. That's fine. But please..." His voice was barely a whisper, and the pleading tone angered me so much that my body acted on its own. I put my arms around Lucien and hugged him from behind. But he broke away from me and backed away.

"If you do this ... if you don't go," he said in a trembling voice, "there's ... no going back."

His eyes were fixated on the floor as if waiting for me to depart the studio. But I couldn't. Even if I had willed myself to, my body refused to comply. "I can't leave," I stated. Summoning every ounce of bravery, I extended my hand toward his chin and gently guided his head toward me. I needed him to look at me, to understand the gravity of the moment.

He appeared tired, but his eyes still shone. I gently stroked his forehead and gave him

a tentative kiss on the lips. But it wasn't enough—I could see that on his face. He was fighting with himself.

“And I don’t want to go,” I whispered and kissed him again, a little harder this time.

I had prayed for weeks and begged God to forgive me. But it was the moment Lucien put his arms around me that freed me from all the burden. It was hard to believe how happy I felt when he opened my jacket and slipped his hands under my sweater. I was committed; there was no turning back. Despite my fears about what was to come, I had no intention of leaving. I gently detached myself from him and gazed at him. There was one more question I needed to answer before I could take the plunge completely. “Am I a replacement for him?”

Lucien drew his brows together and shook his head. “No. Never.”

I wrapped my arms around him and held him close, pressing my head into the crook of his neck, taking a deep breath and letting his warmth and scent lull me.

He slipped his hands under my sweater again, stroked my bare skin, and clawed at me like a small child. His possessive nature turned me on more than I was willing to admit. It lit a fire inside me.

I tried to break free from him, but he wouldn’t let me. “Lu ...?”

“I’m not letting go of you.”

“Oh, I ... actually ... wanted to kiss you.”

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Lucien

Hearing these words from Jonah was killing me. He was here. With me. In the studio. His words calmed my soul. I barely managed a smile and lost myself in his hazel eyes. And when he kissed me, it was like I was being carried away by a gentle breeze.

The loneliness of the last two weeks was swept away and a huge burden was lifted from my shoulders. I had already accepted that Jonah had chosen a path he believed would bring him happiness—a life without me. This thought had caused me so much pain. I was all the more hesitant now, as I still hadn't grasped the sudden turn of events.

Jonah nibbled on my lips and stroked my neck tenderly. Then he slipped his hands under my shirt, touched my chest, and played with my nipples. And that took my breath away. Not once had he dared to do that during our intimate moments. Now, he seemed like a different person. It was as if his other self had displaced the conflicted believer, all to satisfy what it had always craved.

When he stroked my buttocks with his hands and pulled me closer to him, it was the final proof I needed to realize that he was serious. I took his head between my hands and kissed him more passionately than I had ever kissed anyone before. I would have loved to devour him, taking possession of his mouth with my tongue and soaking up every breath of his inside me.

Jonah wrapped his arms around me, emitted sounds of delight, and pressed himself against me. My thoughts went crazy. I wanted to rip his clothes off. To tie him up somewhere and to get my hands on him. I abruptly tore my lips away from him and locked eyes with him, breathing heavily.

Come on! It's Jonah. He will hardly ...

Jonah's chest rose and fell with the effort. He moved his soft lips and looked at me a little embarrassed. But then he bit his bottom lip and a deep desire glittered in his eyes. "Please ..." he said and slipped off his jacket. "Don't hold back."

I stared at him open-mouthed. Hearing him say that left me speechless; in fact, it paralyzed me. Unable to do anything, I stood there motionless and felt my cock twitching.

Jonah lowered his gaze and looked at the bulge in my pants. A smile played around his lips. "I'll help you." His voice was no more than a whisper before he undid my belt and then my pants.

"You don't have to do that."

But it was already too late. He fisted my cock, eliciting a moan from me.

"But I want it," he said and sank to his knees.

Oh damn ... Who is this?

A little awkwardly and hesitantly, he touched my tip with his lips, nudged it with his tongue, and finally licked my glans. I squirmed and had to hold onto his head. He then took one hand and massaged my shaft as he guided me further and further into him until a quiet choking sound came out of him.

“Wait,” I said and immediately pulled out of him. My eyes fell on his other hand, with which he was touching himself. He still had his pants zipped up, but they were bulging with lust.

“I told you not to hold back. I want it. Tell me what to do!”

I swallowed and took a shaky breath. His submissive nature made me so hot that I could barely think straight. But he wanted me to direct him.

How can I do that when he’s messing me up like that?

“Get up!” I said, offering him a hand.

“Did I do something wrong?”

“No. Nothing at all.”

Taking a deep breath, I reached over him and unzipped his pants. I took off his sweater and admired his beautiful upper body for a while. I tenderly caressed his chest and stomach down to his boxers.

“Take your clothes off,” I whispered and did the same.

In no time we were naked face to face. Jonah held his wrists somewhat anxiously and tried to maintain a straight posture. He was so beautiful. So pure.

“I want ...” Jonah bowed his head humbly. “I want you to defile me.”

His submissiveness surprised me. Had I already spoiled him like this? Or was it because of his character? Hadn't he always followed a self-determined, straight path? Because once he decided on a path, there was no turning back—I recently



experienced that myself. Had I awakened a side of him that had previously remained hidden from him?

He stood in front of me so innocently, looking at me expectantly and letting me know with his gaze that I could do anything with him. I resisted the urge to rush, wanting to savor every moment. Stepping closer until our tips touched, I kissed Jonah tenderly. Wrapping my hand around both of our erections, I massaged them together, drawing a sweet moan from his lips.

He searched for my mouth, clearly longing for kisses, but I denied him, too busy trying not to come. Feeling his tongue on mine would have been enough to make me lose control. Instead, I caressed his hips with my other hand and pushed my fingers between his buttocks. Finding the spot I was after, I began to massage his rim.

Jonah bravely stood upright, leaned on me, and put his head over my shoulder. Hearing his heavy breathing so close to my ear sent shivers down my spine, and when I slid my finger inside him, he groaned and clawed at my shoulders.

I immediately pulled back. He sat up and with a look clouded with lust. "It's all good," he affirmed, eager for me to continue.

"Come on!" I led him to the sofa and showed him how to position himself. With his knees on the pillow and his hands on the backrest, he stuck his butt out toward me and glanced over his shoulder, slightly irritated.

I took the lube and positioned myself behind him. First, I gently kneaded his buttocks, then I turned my attention to his exit. I took my time, enjoying exploring his insides with my fingers and driving him crazy.

Jonah got louder and louder, squirming under my touch, and pressed his hand over his mouth.

“You don’t have to be quiet,” I said in a rough voice. “No one can hear you here.”

However, it took three fingers for him to let go of his inhibitions and let out a loud moan. I quickly put on a condom and placed my cock at his hole. Jonah knew what was about to happen and stiffened up. I slowly pushed myself into him as far as I could, his warmth, the tightness ... this incredible feeling. Jonah gasped and reared up. I started to move carefully, back and forth, and was electrified.

When I felt Jonah’s hand on my balls, fireworks exploded within me, causing me to release a growling moan. My desire for him grew immeasurably. I thrust into him faster and faster, eliciting louder and louder noises from him. He lost control and approached the abyss. I pulled out of him.

“What...?” He looked over his shoulder.

I grabbed him, turned him onto his back, and lay on top of him. “You’re not coming that fast,” I said, taking possession of his lips.

“As long as you don’t stop,” he breathed, wrapping his arms and legs around me. “Don’t stop!”

The fire between us burned so hot that I would never stop. I pressed myself into him again and bit his neck. Jonah scratched my sweaty back, threw his head back, and let out a loud moan that got louder and louder.

I never stop.

I thrust into him harder and harder, straightened up, and put a hand on his neck. Jonah’s greedy expression turned me on more and more. The uptight boy was gone. Below me lay a passionate man with a lustful glint in his eyes. “Harder!” he gasped, stretching his neck.

I moved up and down. Jonah grimaced as his muscles trembled with every thrust. Desperately, he curled his fingers into my arms and wrapped his legs tighter around my pelvis.

As much as I tried to delay the sweet fall, I could no longer fight the effect Jonah had on me. When he arched his back, threw his head back, and squirted on his stomach, a fire erupted in my middle. It spread through my whole body like wildfire and a hot wave washed over me. My muscles tensed, and I let out a long, drawn-out moan and squirted inside him.

Before I collapsed on top of him, he placed both hands around my head and sought out my lips.

“More. I want more...” he breathed and stroked my hair.

I laughed. “So greedy all of a sudden?”

“Doesn’t have to be now. But don’t think you’ll get away with it.”

Completely exhausted, I lay down next to him and wiped the sweat from my forehead. Jonah moved to the side so that I could lie on my back, then he cuddled up to me and rested his head on my shoulder. I still found it hard to believe that he was actually here. I wrapped my arm around him almost possessively and held him close to me. My breath was still heavy when he intertwined his leg with mine and touched my chest. As he drew gentle circles around my nipples with his finger, I brushed a dark strand of hair from his face and noticed a slight tension between his brows.

“Where have you been?” I asked quietly.

“At home, with my parents.” He sounded tired now, almost exhausted. “I came back today. That’s where I met Daniela.”

“Who’s that?”

“The blonde from my birthday. Well, she’s not blonde anymore.”

I remembered a blonde. She was the reason I had left earlier without saying goodbye to him. I didn’t want to spoil his tour but secretly hoped it would go wrong. Although not much had happened at that point, apart from the kiss in the studio, he had already completely captivated me.

“It didn’t go the way I’d ... hoped,” he continued. “She made me so angry. That’s when I just took off running.”

Jonah lifted his head and looked at me. He was literally glowing. His cheeks were flushed, and his face was shiny with sweat. He smiled and little dimples formed. I ran my thumb over it and then gently stroked his hair.

“I came here to put an end to all this once and for all,” he confessed ruefully. “But now I’m lying here, feeling your warmth and ... it feels so good. So right.”

I was at a loss for words. But he wasn’t expecting any—he just smiled and put his head back on my shoulder. “I’m glad I came here,” he murmured and wrapped his arm around me.

My body was shaking and I hoped he wouldn’t notice. With the help of Martin and Steven, I had gotten back to my old form over the last two weeks. I didn’t drink much alcohol over the holidays and was probably living healthier than most. But my thoughts had been revolving around Jonah the whole time. I had resigned myself to the fact that it would take a while to get over him, and Steven said that was fine and wouldn’t matter, as by my own admission, I didn’t think much of love anyway. But it had almost driven me crazy that Jonah, of all people, was the one to awaken these feelings in me and upset me so much. I had dedicated all my concentration to

painting. I had found peace and was confident that I had chosen the right path. Ultimately, I could control what went onto the canvas. Not what happened to Jonah.

And now he was here.

With me.

I hugged him tightly.

He was humming softly. He had fallen asleep.

I lay beside him for a while, enjoying his warmth, but it soon got chilly. Getting up, I grabbed a blanket, turned off the lights, and lay back down with him. I gave him a kiss and snuggled up to him. When he put his arm around me and pulled me close, the feelings inside me almost boiled over.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 10:55 am*

Liberated from the nagging thoughts, I finally slept deeply. In the morning, the sun beamed directly onto my face, and I felt the warmth of a soft woolen blanket against my skin. When I realized that I was lying behind Lucien and holding him in my arms, I flinched in surprise.

“What is it?” he mumbled sleepily and turned to me with his eyes closed.

“Nothing,” I replied, shoving the images from last night out of my head.

“Do you already regret it again?” he asked, snuggling up to me.

“I ... no ... I was just surprised.”

“That you’re gay?”

“I’m not gay.”

Lucien sat up and brushed his hair back. “It looked different down there last night, though.” He pointed at my crotch with a meaningful look.

I raised the woolen blanket higher, sat up as well, and sheepishly ran my hands through my hair. “It...”

“What?”

He didn’t bother to contain his grin as he reached for the cigarettes. Placing one between his lips, he glanced at the CD player where the lighter lay. Too indolent to

move, he remained seated, the cigarette held loosely between his fingers as his eyes lingered on me. Had I not already been undressed, I might have felt as though he was peeling away my layers with his gaze.

The buzzing of my phone was a relief. I sprang up, hastily slipped into my shorts, and rummaged through my jeans. It was a message from Simon.

“ Hello, Jonah, Happy New Year! Back in town? Are we going to see the movie tomorrow?”

“ Of course. Happy New Year to you too,” I texted back, then tucked the phone away again.

Before I turned back to Lucien to face an unsettling truth, I slipped on my shirt and took a deep breath. Contrary to my expectation that he was staring at me, he sat cross-legged under the woolen blanket, cradling the ashtray in his lap. He smoked his cigarette and absentmindedly watched the embers.

“I don’t want you to misunderstand me,” I said with uncertainty.

His eyes darted up, staring at me with both fear and hope.

“I have to digest this first,” I explained, struggling for words. I realized that I somehow lacked the vocabulary to talk about such things. “After all ... you’re a man.”

Lucien’s face brightened a little. He took a deep drag from the cigarette and blew out the smoke. Then he stroked his face. With his lips pressed together, he looked at me again and forced himself to smile. “Why are you fighting it? There’s nothing wrong with it.”

“Do you even understand what I’ve done?” After a brief moment of silence, I gave

him the answer myself. “I’m going to hell. God wants nothing more to do with me. I can’t imagine what will happen when my parents find out, which I hope will never happen.”

“Well, then at least we have something in common,” he said rather casually and knocked the ash off his cigarette.

I was taken aback, unsure if he had intended to reveal so much, given his sudden tenseness. He seemed unaware that I knew his story, making his vulnerability all the more surprising as he gazed at me like a wounded animal. “My parents don’t want anything to do with me,” he murmured softly, shoulders sagging. With a trembling exhale, he continued, “And... I’m sorry for putting you in this situation. I’ve been grappling with it for weeks ... lost in my own turmoil.” His voice filled with remorse as he bowed his head, unable to meet my eyes. “I know I’m not responsible for his death, but ... it haunts me. I never meant to drag you into it.”

“Martin told me about it before Christmas,” I admitted. “I’m sorry for the loss.”

Lu grimaced and inhaled a nervous drag on his cigarette. He glanced up at me again. “You’re not his replacement.”

“You already told me that yesterday.”

“I just wanted to make it clear again. You’re really important to me, Jonah. And ... I was also so confused because I ... fell ... in love with you.”

The weight of his words took time to sink in. I stood there, stunned, my gaze fixed on him. I struggled to find the right words in reply. It dawned on me that my feelings for him ran deeper than I had felt before, yet I knew I had much to learn before expressing them as effortlessly as he did.

He seemed to be amused by my awkward manner. His face brightened again and he



beamed at me with a broad grin. “Come on, be honest. You’re into me, whether you want to admit it or not,” he remarked. Satisfied, he stubbed out the cigarette and set the ashtray aside. “You should be proud of yourself for finally acting on your own feelings.”

I felt a little offended but was relieved that the gloomy mood had passed.

“But I’m not gay,” I replied emphatically.

“Oh yeah, then where’s your girl? Because I don’t see one here.”

“Stop it!” I demanded. “I just ... like you. I also would if you were a woman. It’s not my fault you’re a man.”

Lucien appeared surprised at first, then attempted to stifle his laughter. But my serious demeanor made it impossible for him, as he burst into such hearty laughter that he clutched his stomach and fell sideways onto the pillow. When I saw his white teeth flash, I remembered the photo hanging on the wall in his room. The photo of him and Phil, where he was also laughing so hard you could see his teeth. It was the first time he’d laughed like that for me, so I went to him and knelt down next to him. He calmed down again and sighed.

“No, please,” I said. “Don’t stop laughing.”

He dragged me on top of him and kissed me passionately. I resisted at first, but when he stopped and looked at me, I wanted more. I hesitantly touched his beautiful lips. “You know,” I said softly, “I meant it back then when I asked you what you wanted from me.”

He stroked my cheek tenderly. “Everything. I want everything from you. Your heart and your soul.”

The gravity with which he uttered those words sent a shiver down my spine. “You are the devil.”

“Maybe...” He laughed and grabbed between my legs. “But you really aren’t an angel either.”

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I didn’t return to the shared house until evening. As Martin stepped out of the shower, adjusting the towel around his waist, I closed the door behind me. He regarded me with a puzzled expression.

“Hello, could it be that you were home yesterday?”

“No ... well ... yes,” I mumbled and wanted to disappear into my room.

“Wait,” he said suspiciously. “What have you been up to?”

Up to?

The scorching heat rushed into my head, leaving me dumbfounded as I stared at him. “I didn’t ... do anything.”

Martin narrowed his eyes, as if he was scanning me from top to bottom for lies. I was definitely now blushing as I gripped the doorframe.

“I ... was with Lu ... in the studio,” I mumbled.

God, why are you telling him this?

Martin smiled mischievously and pushed back his wet hair. “Is he still there?”

I frowned, unable to get another word out.

Could it be that he ...

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone.”

My jaw dropped. I had summoned up all my courage to make it clear to Lucien that I wanted to be with him. The fact that Martin was so relaxed about the whole thing really upset me.

“Who...?” My voice was no more than a whisper.

“Who do you think?” Martin laughed. “Lu is the worst actor there is. And Steven can’t keep a secret anyway.”

I stood there tensely, my nails digging at the doorframe.

“Relax, Jonah. It’s not a big deal. I’m happy for you. For the both of you. That is a good thing.”

I forced myself to nod and tried to take a deep breath.

“Are we eating together?” Martin asked.

“Yes.” My voice sounded strange to my ears, but Martin didn’t seem to notice and had already disappeared into his room.

He’s happy ... for us? Oh God!

As if in a trance, I wandered into my room and pushed the door shut behind me. And then I stood there, in this white room with nothing but a bed and a lamp, and suddenly felt so out of place.

My thoughts were already wandering back to Lucien. I could still hardly believe that it was him I wanted. His scent alone, albeit mixed with cigarette smoke, made me weak. And that smile! Holy Mary, Mother of God!

I knelt in front of the bed and gazed at the white wall, exactly where Jesus would have been placed on the cross—if Lucien hadn't beaten him to it. I pulled the suitcase out, pushing the training clothes aside to reveal the collected poems. I had neatly stored the colored sheets.

When I became aware of the emptiness of the room again, I remembered Lucien's words. He had called it a white cube . A museum space that at least had more potential than a prison cell.

I looked at the colored sheets in front of me and then back at the plain wall. A little color would really do the room good. A smile spread across my face.

What would Lu think about that?

THE END

Next up is the following book in the Room Series

Dark Room Junkie