



Wraith

Author: *Quinn Hawthorne*

Category: Horror

Description: They killed me.

I was their fated mate, and they deliberately killed me.

They laughed while I took my last breath, but they won't be laughing for long.

I don't deserve my fate—and they don't deserve my forgiveness.

Now, I'm back, and I refuse to rest until I drag them to the grave with me.

They can't run.

They can't hide.

They can't bury the past as easily as they buried me.

And I won't let them.

Because even death won't stop me from making them mine.

Total Pages (Source): 39

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

One

I used to believe in fate.

That somewhere in this chaotic, uncaring universe, there was a force binding souls together, guiding them toward the love they were destined to find.

Turns out, fate wasn't kind. It was cruel. And I was its favorite joke.

The university's clock tower stood tall against the evening sky, its Gothic spires casting long, jagged shadows across the courtyard. I sat on the edge of the fountain, my psychology textbook open on my lap, though I hadn't turned a page in over ten minutes. My focus was elsewhere—on Lucian.

He leaned against the ancient oak that had likely watched over students for centuries. Its bark gnarled with the passage of time, much like the complexities of human relationships I studied. His girlfriend's arms were curled around him, her head resting on his chest. She laughed at something he whispered, her fingers playing with the curls at the nape of his neck—a light, carefree sound that knifed through my heart.

That should be me.

I clenched my fists. The bond thrummed beneath my skin, a constant, maddening reminder that we were connected, whether they wanted to admit it or not. Whether he wanted to admit it or not.

As my gaze drifted back to the book, the words blurring into obscurity, my mind

wandered back to the first day of freshman year, when fate had cruelly tangled me in its web. I had walked into the orientation hall, my heart full of hope and nerves, only to feel it—the inexplicable pull, a magnetic force that tugged at my very soul. It wasn't a voice, exactly, but it whispered all the same: Here. This is where you belong.

Then I saw him. His eyes met mine across the crowded room, sharp and unwelcoming, his expression hardening as though he could see straight into me. The frown that marred his handsome face felt like a slap, a declaration that whatever this connection was, he wanted no part of it.

But it didn't stop there.

It happened again. And again. Five times in total.

Each time, the pull found me, stronger and sharper, anchoring me to someone new. The tall one who kept his distance, the one with the easy grin that never reached his eyes, the brooding figure who lingered in the shadows. And him—the last one—the one whose cold, calculated stare sent a chill racing down my spine.

I didn't know their names then, nor did I understand what made them take one look at me and immediately reject me. I'd tried to stay away, to bury the bond, to pretend it didn't exist—just like they did. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't shake the feeling of them.

Of him.

Lucian's laugh echoed across the courtyard, rich and unguarded, sending a faint ripple through the air that I couldn't ignore—even though I tried. It wasn't just him, though.

Ciaran stood slightly apart from the group, his arms crossed over his chest. There was a quiet weight in his expression, something unspoken lurking behind the stormy blue of his eyes. He glanced my way briefly, his brows pulling together as if he wanted to say something but couldn't find the words.

Aeron lingered at the edges, as he always did, observing like he was above it all. His dark eyes flicked between the others, sharp and assessing. Every so often, he'd adjust his glasses—a small, deliberate gesture that seemed to anchor him to his perpetual state of control.

Kael, always so effortless, leaned casually against the same tree as Lucian, flipping a coin with lazy precision. The smirk that curled his lips was equal parts charm and menace, a combination that was as charming as it was unnerving. He caught the coin with a flick of his wrist, his grin deepening, like he'd just thought of a joke he wouldn't bother sharing.

And then there was Thorne.

He stood slightly apart from the others, his hands shoved into his pockets, watching me with the same cold detachment he always did. If the others had edges, Thorne was all sharp angles—cutting, deliberate, and impossible to miss. His gaze was steady and unflinching, daring me to look away first.

I gathered my things, willing myself to ignore the way his attention seemed to follow my every move. The chill of the evening crept in, a biting reminder to leave while I still could. I turned, ready to escape to the library and bury myself in studies, but I didn't get far.

“Lily,” Thorne called out, his voice cutting through the stillness like a blade. He didn't bother to move from his position, his presence commanding enough without any effort. “Where are you off to in such a hurry? Got more books to cry into?”

I froze, tightening my grip on my bag's straps. The weight of his attention was suffocating. "Just trying to get some studying done," I said, forcing my voice to sound steady even as my insides churned.

Thorne smirked, that cruel, practiced twist of his lips evident even from a distance. "Sure, because that's worked out so well for you so far, hasn't it? Why keep hanging around where you're clearly not wanted?"

The sting of his words hit like a slap, sharp and unrelenting. My chest tightened, my cheeks burned, and for a second, I thought I might actually say something back. But what was the point? Thorne never let up. None of them did.

I dropped my gaze, swallowing the lump rising in my throat, and walked away, his disdain clinging to me like a shadow.

Instead of heading to the library like I'd planned, I found myself at the campus café. The buzz of students laughing, ordering drinks, and cramming for midterms felt like a better vibe than the one I just left. I ordered a coffee, hoping the noise and warmth would drown out Thorne's words.

"Hey, Lily!" A familiar voice cut through the crowd, and I turned to see Jenna waving me over. Her smile was warm, inviting, a rare relief after the day I'd had.

"Rough day?" she asked, her eyes narrowing as she took in my expression.

I managed a weak smile and sat down across from her. "Something like that," I said, keeping my answer vague. Jenna knew about the tension between me and the guys—she'd heard enough snide comments in passing—but she didn't know the full story. No one did.

She rolled her eyes as she sipped her tea. "Let me guess. Those assholes again?"

“It’s not...” I hesitated, sighing. “It’s complicated.”

Jenna snorted. “They’re not complicated. They’re just overgrown boys with superiority complexes. Why do you even let them get to you?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted, stirring my coffee absently. “It’s not like I want to. I just... feel stuck. Like I can’t get away from it.”

Jenna leaned forward, her expression softening. “Look, Lily, I know it’s easier said than done, but you can’t let them live in your head rent-free. You’re here to get your degree, not to let a bunch of losers screw with your head.”

Her bluntness made me smile, just a little. “I know you’re right. It’s just... hard.”

“Of course it’s hard. They suck.” She grinned, her teasing tone making me smile even more as I relaxed into my seat. “But you don’t. Remember that.”

For a while, we talked about lighter things—midterms, our professor’s hilariously monotone lectures, and the chaos of group projects. Jenna’s laughter was contagious, and for a brief moment, it felt like the weight on my chest was just a little bit lighter.

But as the café started to close and the crowd thinned out, reality crept back in. The laughter faded, the warmth dimmed, and the quiet left space for the doubts and loneliness to return.

Jenna gave me a hug before she left, promising to send me her notes from today’s class. “You’ve got this,” she said with a wink. “Don’t let anyone convince you otherwise.”

“Thanks, Jenna,” I said, managing a real smile. “You’re the best.”

Walking back to my dorm alone, I felt the familiar ache settle in again. The snippets of laughter and conversation I overheard from passing groups of students felt like echoes from a world I couldn't reach, a reminder of everything I felt I was missing.

By the time I reached my room, the silence felt almost unbearable. The walls seemed to close in, amplifying the loneliness I'd been trying to push away all day. I dropped my bag on the floor, kicked off my shoes, and sat on the edge of my bed, staring at nothing.

I grabbed my journal from the desk, flipping to an empty page. Writing had always been my escape, a way to make sense of the chaos in my head. But now, the words wouldn't come. My pen hovered above the paper, trembling with the weight of everything I couldn't put into words.

What was I even trying to say? That I felt invisible? That I was tired of trying to fit into a world that seemed determined to keep me on the outside? That the ache of wanting to belong never went away, no matter how much I tried to ignore it?

The moonlight spilled through the window, casting a soft glow across the room. It made everything look peaceful, serene, in a way that mocked the storm raging inside me. I wanted to scream, to shatter the quiet, to do something—anything—that would make the world feel less empty.

Instead, I curled up on my bed, clutching the journal to my chest like it might hold me together. The clock on my nightstand ticked steadily, each second dragging into the next, until the hours blurred and sleep finally claimed me.

But even in my dreams, the feeling of isolation followed. It was always there, waiting for me, no matter where I went or how far I tried to run.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

Two

I took a deep breath as I approached the quad where my mates often gathered. Just seeing them from afar made my heart clench with a painful mix of longing and hurt. Every step closer felt like willingly walking into a storm. But avoiding them entirely would make it seem like I was running away, and I couldn't let them have that power.

Lucian's voice rang out, sharp and mocking. "Well, if it isn't little Lily. Come to beg for our attention again?"

I kept my eyes down, pretending not to hear him. Maybe if I kept walking, he'd let it go.

"Hey, I'm talking to you." His tone hardened as his hand closed around my arm, halting me mid-step. The heat of his touch burned through the sleeve of my jacket, sending an involuntary jolt through me.

"Lucian, that's enough." Ciaran's voice came from somewhere behind him, calm and even, but firm. "Let her go."

Lucian scoffed but let me go with an exaggerated flourish, his smirk twisting into something meaner. "You're always playing the hero, aren't you?" His eyes darted back, gleaming with malice. "Don't mistake his soft heart for actual sympathy, Lily."

My gaze flicked to Ciaran, searching his face for some kind of clue. Did he pity me? Did he care at all? The sharp edge of Lucian's words said no, but something about the way Ciaran glanced at me—quick and reluctant—made my chest tighten.

“Just leave her alone, Lucian,” Ciaran said, his voice quieter now, like he wanted to avoid making a scene.

“She doesn’t need sympathy,” Lucian said, his smirk returning as he motioned toward the others. “She needs a reality check.”

“She needs to be ignored,” Ciaran shot back, his gaze hardening. “So why don’t we all just do that?”

Thorne chuckled, leaning casually against a bench. “She’s like a stray dog,” he said with a smirk. “Keeps coming back no matter how many times you kick her.”

My throat tightened as the others laughed, their amusement a cruel chorus that left me frozen in place.

“Let’s go,” Ciaran said, already turning his back on me. His tone was dismissive, like the conversation—and I—were nothing more than a fleeting inconvenience.

The group moved on, their laughter fading into the distance. I stood there for a moment, trembling from the effort of holding back tears. My heart ached, not just from their words but from the way Ciaran’s brief intervention had ignited a hope I knew better than to entertain.

I knew I should stop reaching for crumbs of kindness from Ciaran. But the bond pulled at me, relentless and undeniable. I couldn’t stop myself from clinging to those brief moments when Ciaran almost seemed to care. It was pathetic, I knew. Childish, to keep wishing for fairy tale endings.

Maybe one day, I’d find the strength to walk away. But today wasn’t that day. The yearning in my soul drowned out all reason, tethering me to the people who despised me the most. I was trapped—bound by a cruel twist of fate. My only option was to

endure, clinging to the fragile hope that someday, somehow, things would change.

My legs felt like lead as I pushed through the crowd toward my psychology class. Every step carried the weight of exhaustion and determination, the encounter earlier leaving me drained but unwilling to let them win. Normalcy was the only anchor I had left, and sticking to my routine felt like a lifeline in the chaos.

Sliding into a seat near the back of the crowded lecture hall, I barely registered the professor's voice as she launched into a discussion about trauma and its effects on adolescent development.

The irony wasn't lost on me.

My mind drifted, unbidden, to my own wounds—the sting of rejection that seemed to follow me like a shadow, never healing, always aching. A familiar nausea churned in my stomach, the kind that came when emotions overwhelmed reason.

The faces around me blurred. The professor's words became muffled static. My chest tightened, and I knew I couldn't sit there a second longer.

Grabbing my things, I slipped out quietly, ignoring the curious glances from my classmates. The crisp air outside hit my face, sharp and cooling, easing the flush of humiliation that lingered like a brand on my skin. I closed my eyes for a moment, letting the cold bite at my cheeks as I tried to gather what was left of myself.

I found an empty bench near the edge of the quad and sank onto it, my bag slumping to the ground beside me. My hands twisted together in my lap as tears welled up in my eyes, threatening to spill. I felt so utterly alone, trapped in a life that offered no solace, no escape.

It was my fault really. For even being here. For letting my parents believe my

scholarship here was some golden ticket. The scholarship covered tuition, that was all. And that was where the kindness stopped.

Most of the students living in the dorms were from wealthy families, and it showed. Designer clothes, casual mentions of trips to Aspen, vacations planned with carefree abandon. My own clothes were from red discount stores, and my meals consisted of whatever cheap food could be found at the student cafeteria.

But that was fine. Or it should have been. But the constant reminders were difficult to not let crush me. The crunch of shoes on gravel made me look up. Jenna, her auburn hair pulled into a loose braid, was walking toward me with a concerned expression.

“Hey,” she said, plopping down next to me without waiting for an invitation. “What happened?”

I hesitated, biting my lip. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing,” she said firmly. “I saw Lucian grab your arm earlier. Assholes. All of them.”

A hollow laugh escaped me. “I don’t think they even see me as a person.”

“Well, that’s their problem,” Jenna snapped. “Not yours. Seriously, Lily, why do you even let them get to you? They’re not worth it.”

I shrugged, unable to find the words to explain the pull they had on me without spilling the truth. It wasn’t something I could ignore, no matter how much I wanted to.

Jenna sighed, her irritation softening into something gentler. “Look, I get it. They’re...intense. But you’re better than this. Better than them.”

I gave her a weak smile, appreciating the sentiment even if I didn't entirely believe it.

"So, about that group project," she said, clearly eager to change the subject. "We need to set up a meeting soon. I don't want to leave it until the last minute."

"Yeah," I said, grateful for the distraction. "You're right. We should probably email everyone tonight."

"Good." Jenna nodded decisively. "We'll tackle this thing like pros. Show them what we're made of."

Her enthusiasm was contagious, and for a moment, I almost forgot about the earlier encounter. Almost. But when Lucian and his girlfriend strolled past the bench, their laughter ringing out, the ache in my chest returned with a vengeance.

Jenna followed my gaze, her expression hardening. "Ignore them," she said, her voice firm. "They don't matter."

I nodded, trying to absorb some of her confidence. "Thanks, Jenna. For everything."

"Anytime," she said with a smile. "And hey—if they try anything again, just let me know. I'll take them down for you."

Her exaggerated tough-girl act made me laugh despite myself. "I'll keep that in mind."

As Jenna stood to leave, she rested a hand on my shoulder briefly. "You're not alone, Lily. Don't forget that."

Her words stayed with me long after she was gone. Maybe I wasn't as alone as I thought. Maybe there was a way out of this cycle of hurt and rejection. But for now,

all I could do was take it one day at a time.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

Three

The envelope stood out against the chaos of my desk, its pristine, cream-colored paper out of place among the piles of tattered notebooks and half-empty coffee cups. My name was scrawled across the front in bold, slanted handwriting I'd recognize anywhere.

Kael.

My breath caught as I picked it up, turning it over in my hands. There was no return address and no indication of what might be inside. My fingers trembled slightly as I slid a nail under the flap, tearing it open with more force than necessary. Inside was a single sheet of paper, folded neatly in thirds.

Lily, Meet us at the old Dovetail Theater tonight at 8. -K

The words were sparse, almost clinical, but the sight of Kael's signature sent a familiar jolt through me. My heart raced as I read and reread the note. Meet us? Did that mean all of them? Why?

They'd never invited me anywhere before. Never reached out, never acknowledged me beyond their biting remarks and cold stares.

My pulse quickened with something dangerously close to hope.

The Dovetail Theater. Everyone on campus knew about it. Once the crown jewel of the city, it had fallen into disrepair decades ago. Now, it was little more than a hollow

shell, its faded grandeur covered in graffiti and broken beer bottles.

Despite—or maybe because of—its derelict state, it had become a popular spot for students. Late-night parties, secret rendezvous, and even the occasional hazing ritual took place within its crumbling walls. Professors and campus security tried to keep students out, but it only added to the appeal. Dovetail had a reputation, a rebellious allure that made it the perfect backdrop for the bold—or the foolish.

And now, they wanted me to meet them there.

“This has to be it,” I murmured to myself, clutching the note like a lifeline. “They wouldn’t invite me just to hurt me again... would they?”

The rest of the afternoon passed in a blur. My lectures became white noise, my thoughts consumed by what the night might hold. Reconciliation? An apology? The possibilities were endless, and I let myself indulge in each one, no matter how improbable.

Back in my dorm, I rifled through my closet, discarding one outfit after another. Everything felt wrong—too casual, too try-hard, too... me. I finally settled on a simple black dress that hugged my figure without drawing too much attention. It wasn’t fancy, but it made me feel put together, confident. Almost like I belonged.

Standing in front of the mirror, I hesitated. My reflection stared back, her eyes wide with nervous excitement. I tugged at a loose strand of hair, then smoothed it back into place. Did I look too eager? Too desperate?

The door to the dorm creaked open, and my roommate, Elise, strolled in, arms loaded with shopping bags. Her heels clicked against the linoleum floor, her glossy auburn hair bouncing with every step. Elise always looked like she belonged in one of those influencer social media posts—poised, polished, perfect.

She dropped her bags onto her bed and raised an eyebrow at me. “Wow, Lily. Big date or something?”

I flushed, tugging at the hem of my dress. “No. Just... meeting some people.”

Elise plopped down onto her neatly made bed, propping her chin in her hand as she studied me. “Uh-huh. And these ‘people’—are they the reason you’ve been moping around for, like, ever?”

Her bluntness made my stomach twist. “I don’t mope.”

“Sure, and I don’t spend too much on shoes,” she quipped, gesturing at the bags surrounding her. “Come on, who are you meeting? You’re never this dressed up.”

“It’s... complicated.” I avoided her gaze, pretending to fuss with the zipper of my dress.

“Complicated like you’re about to make a really bad decision? Or complicated, like I should have wine ready when you get back?” Her tone was teasing, but there was an undercurrent of genuine curiosity.

I hesitated. Elise didn’t know much about my connection to the guys—thankfully. Explaining the pain of being tied to people who didn’t want me was a rabbit hole I wasn’t ready to go down.

“It’s just some people from class,” I lied.

Elise squinted at me but didn’t press further. “Well, for what it’s worth, you look great. And if these ‘class people’ give you any trouble, just remember you’re way out of their league.”

Her words brought a fleeting smile to my lips. Elise might have been blunt and a bit self-absorbed, but she had a way of delivering compliments that felt like gospel.

“Thanks, Elise.”

“Don’t mention it. Now go knock ‘em dead—or, you know, don’t let them knock you down.”

The walk to the theater felt longer than it should have. The campus was quiet at this hour, most students huddled in their dorms or the library. As I crossed the empty quad, the click of my boot heels against the pavement echoed unnervingly loud.

The Dovetail Theater loomed ahead, its once-grand marquee now cracked and weatherworn. Posters from forgotten performances clung stubbornly to its walls, their edges curling with age. The faint glow of streetlights cast eerie shadows across its entrance, and for a moment, I hesitated.

Was this really a good idea?

But then I thought of Kael’s note, of the way my name had looked in his handwriting. This has to be it. They wouldn’t have invited me if it didn’t mean something.

The theater loomed ahead, its weathered marquee jutting out like a reminder of its forgotten past. The streetlights barely reached this part of campus, leaving the cracked pavement bathed in shadow. A faint hum of bass and laughter drifted out from inside, mingling with the cool night air. It wasn’t the eerie silence I’d been expecting, but the kind of noise that suggested... a party?

I hesitated at the door, the warped wood groaning slightly as I pushed it open. Inside, the sound hit me fully—music playing from someone’s phone, scattered conversation, bursts of laughter. The faint scent of cheap beer hung in the air, and I

caught glimpses of movement through the dim lighting.

It wasn't the scene I'd imagined. Not by a long shot.

Lucian, Kael, Thorne, Ciaran, and Aeron were scattered across the space like kings holding court in their own private palace. A half-empty bottle of whiskey sat on a dusty makeshift table, surrounded by red solo cups and crumpled chip bags. Thorne was laughing, sprawled across a velvet chair that had probably seen its last good days decades ago. Kael leaned against the edge of the stage, flipping that stupid coin of his, while Lucian stood nearby, gesturing animatedly as he recounted some story. Ciaran sat further back, more subdued, a cigarette balanced between his fingers, the ember glowing faintly. Aeron was perched on the stage steps, his dark eyes skimming over a book, barely paying attention to the others.

They looked so... at ease. Carefree. Like this wasn't the first time they'd gathered here to unwind. Like I hadn't even crossed their minds.

I took a cautious step forward, clearing my throat to announce my presence. "Hey... you asked me to come?"

Five heads turned at once, the weight of their collective gaze nearly knocking the breath from my lungs. Lucian's grin faltered for just a moment before it curved into something sharper, crueler. "Oh, look who actually showed up," he said, tipping his cup toward me in mock salute.

Kael's coin caught the light as he flicked it into the air. "Didn't think you'd actually have the guts," he drawled, catching it with a smirk.

"I—I thought..." My words faltered, the flicker of hope I'd carried all the way here starting to dim. "You said you wanted to talk."

Thorne let out a low laugh, his voice dripping with condescension. “Talk? Oh, sweetheart, is that what you thought this was?”

Heat flushed my cheeks, embarrassment crawling under my skin. I took another step forward, desperate to salvage the moment. “I just... I thought maybe we could clear the air. I know things have been?—”

“Awkward?” Kael interrupted, his tone mocking. “Tense? Painfully one-sided?”

Lucian leaned back against the stage, taking a slow sip from his cup. “You’re really something, Lily,” he said, shaking his head. “Always holding on to these... fantasies.”

My chest tightened as their laughter rose around me, bouncing off the walls of the theater like an echo chamber of my worst fears. “It’s not a fantasy,” I said quietly, though my voice wavered. “I just... I thought maybe we could start over.”

“Start over?” Thorne sneered, standing to his full height and sauntering toward me. “And why would we want to do that?”

Each word felt like a dagger, piercing the fragile hope I’d carried with me. “Because...” My voice cracked. I took a deep breath before continuing. “Because we’re supposed to be?—”

“Don’t,” Ciaran interrupted, his voice cutting through the room like a blade. He didn’t even look up from his cigarette, but the cold finality in his tone stopped me in my tracks. “Just don’t.”

I froze, his dismissal hitting harder than any of the others’ taunts. My gaze darted between them, searching for any glimmer of softness, of sincerity. But there was nothing. Just smirks and indifference.

Aeron finally closed his book, his expression unreadable as he met my gaze for the briefest of moments. “You should go,” he said quietly. No malice, no mockery—just an observation. Like I wasn’t worth the time it would take to argue.

My throat burned as I struggled to hold back tears. “Why did you even invite me here?” I demanded, my voice rising in desperation. “Just to humiliate me?”

Lucian’s smirk widened. “Maybe. Or maybe we were just bored.”

Kael laughed, flipping his coin again. “Consider it entertainment. I wanted to see if you learned better yet.”

I stumbled back a step, the weight of their words crashing over me like a tidal wave. My hands trembled as I clutched the straps of my bag, my knuckles whitening with the effort to steady myself. The room blurred, tears welling in my eyes as their laughter echoed around me, sharp and cutting.

“Why can’t you just...” My voice broke, trembling under the weight of everything I wanted to say but couldn’t. “Why can’t you just leave me alone?”

Lucian smirked, the kind of cruel smile that curled at the edges, his amusement feeding off my misery. “Why would we?” he shot back, his words laced with venom. “It’s too easy.”

Thorne chuckled darkly, leaning back against the wall, his gaze piercing. “And too entertaining.”

Their laughter grew louder, a cacophony of mockery that seemed to rise and swell until it pressed down on me, suffocating. My throat tightened as the sting of humiliation burned behind my eyes. I couldn’t stay here, not with their sneers crawling under my skin like venom.

I turned and bolted for the door, my chest heaving with suppressed sobs. The cool night air hit me like a slap, sharp and jarring against my flushed cheeks. It did nothing to ease the ache in my chest, the hollow, suffocating pressure that had taken root there. My steps faltered, the weight of everything pulling me down like chains.

“Why can’t they just respect me?” I whispered into the empty night, the words splintering in my throat. “Why is that so fucking hard?”

The streetlights blurred through my tears as I kept walking, my legs moving without direction. Each step felt heavier than the last, dragging me farther into the darkness. My breaths came in short, shaky gasps, the cold biting at my skin as the night stretched endlessly before me.

Somewhere deep inside, a small voice whispered that this was it—the breaking point. That something inside me had finally cracked under the weight of their cruelty. I tried to swallow it down, to push it away, but it clung to me, heavy and unyielding.

I slowed to a stop beneath the orange glow of a flickering streetlight. My hands trembled as I wiped at my cheeks, smearing the tears that refused to stop falling. The world around me was quiet, save for the faint hum of distant traffic and the hollow echo of my own breaths.

And then, something shifted.

No.

The word hit me like a spark, igniting a fire that had been smoldering somewhere deep within. It wasn’t loud or angry, but it was steady, unrelenting. A defiant beat against the suffocating weight of their words.

No. Not this time.

I clenched my fists, my nails digging into my palms as the heat in my chest began to grow, sharp and insistent. Morphing into something harder, something sharper. I wasn't going to keep running. I wasn't going to let them see me break again.

"Fuck this," I said aloud, the words trembling but fierce, cutting through the stillness. My voice carried on the cold wind, brittle but stronger than I'd expected. "I'm done hiding. I'm done letting them win."

The fire in my chest burned brighter, my steps steadying as I turned on my heel and headed back toward the theater. The night seemed darker now, the shadows longer, but I welcomed it. Let them see me coming. Let them face me, for once.

I didn't know what I was going to say when I got there. I didn't even know if they'd still be there. But I wasn't going to run anymore.

Not from them. Not from this.

The theater loomed in the distance, its dark silhouette etched against the night sky. My heart pounded in my chest, but it wasn't from fear this time. It was from something else—something hotter, fiercer, and far more dangerous.

I felt the stirrings of something I hadn't felt in years.

Control.

And I wasn't going to let go of it.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

Four

The theater's faint glow seemed to mock me as I pushed the door open again, the sound of their laughter grating against my nerves. My steps echoed across the empty space, each one feeling heavier than the last. The air smelled of stale beer, whiskey, and old wood, the remnants of their revelry scattered across the floor. Even though it was just an hour later, not a single one of them was in the same place I last saw them in, and they hadn't noticed me yet.

Lucian lounged in one of the theater seats, his legs stretched out as he swirled a drink in his hand. Kael perched on the edge of the piano, lazily tapping a discordant tune on the keys, while Thorne leaned casually against the side of the stage, a beer bottle in his hand and his ever-present sneer on his face. Aeron sat near the stage steps, his dark gaze sharp but detached, and Ciaran stood off to the side, arms crossed, his expression unreadable.

I froze near the entrance, my hands curling into fists at my sides. Their laughter filled the space, unbothered and cruel. It wasn't just the mockery they'd thrown at me earlier—it was the way they moved together so seamlessly, as if I'd never even existed. As if I were nothing but a shadow haunting their edges.

Thorne's gaze flicked toward me from where he lounged casually on the edge of the stage, his long legs stretched out in front of him. His smirk curled with cruel delight as he leaned back on his hands. "Well, well. Look who's back," he drawled. "Couldn't stay away, could you?"

Lucian sat a few feet away, balanced on a chair he'd dragged up onto the stage, his

elbows resting lazily on his knees. His smirk mirrored Thorne's, cold and sharp. "Persistent, isn't she? You'd think she'd get the hint by now."

Kael was seated near the piano, spinning his coin between his fingers with the same infuriating ease he always had, watching me approach with an amused glint in his eye.

Aeron, however, was the picture of disinterest. He leaned against the stage's far edge, his eyes glued to his phone as if the entire scene unfolding before him wasn't worth his attention. His fingers moved with casual precision, scrolling as though he hadn't a care in the world, but the slight furrow in his brow hinted at his quiet judgment.

Ciaran, standing off to the side, shifted uncomfortably. His arms were crossed tightly over his chest, his gaze flickering between me and the others. His jaw clenched briefly before he looked away, as though refusing to engage but equally unable to distance himself from what was happening.

The dusty aisle stretched ahead like a bridge I couldn't afford to burn, but I didn't falter. My boots hit the edge of the stage with a sharp thud as I stopped short. My breath came fast, my chest rising and falling as I stared up at them, their expressions dripping with disdain.

"You think this is funny?" I spat, my voice trembling with anger.

Kael smirked, flipping his coin lazily into the air. "Oh, sweetheart," he said with a grin. "Everything's a game if you play it right."

"I'm not your game," I said, my voice rising. "I'm not your entertainment, or your punching bag, or?—"

Thorne shifted, swinging his legs down as he stood, now towering over me from his

position on the stage. He tilted his head, his smirk deepening. “Then what are you, Lily? Enlighten us.”

His words hit like a slap, but I didn’t flinch. Instead, I stepped up onto the stage, my boots scuffing against the worn planks. The proximity didn’t intimidate me; it fueled me.

“You want to know what I am?” I said sharply, glaring at each of them in turn. “I’m the person who’s done. Done with all of this.”

Lucian raised an eyebrow, his smirk faltering slightly as he leaned back in his chair. “Done with what, exactly?”

“With pretending I care,” I snapped. “That I want anything to do with you. You don’t want me here? Fine. But don’t think for a second that you get to keep doing this and expect me to stick around.”

Kael’s smirk wavered, his coin stalling mid-flip as he straightened. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means,” I said sharply, my voice carrying through the theater, “that maybe someday, I will disappear. Maybe this is your only chance to stop being the assholes you are. Because when I leave—whether I transfer, graduate, or just walk out one day—I will never look back. You won’t even have the privilege of an acquaintanceship.”

Thorne scoffed, stepping closer, his boots echoing against the wood. “You think you can just walk away?” he asked, his voice low and dangerous. “You don’t get to make demands, Lily.”

“I’m not making demands,” I said, standing my ground. “I’m giving you a choice.”

Ciaran's sharp intake of breath broke the tension for a moment. His voice was quieter than the others, but it carried. "Lily, maybe this isn't the way?—"

"Stay out of it, Ciaran," Thorne snapped, not even sparing him a glance. "You don't get to play the voice of reason now."

Ciaran flinched, his lips pressing into a thin line as he stepped back, his shoulders tense. The way his gaze lingered on me, conflicted and strained, made something in my chest tighten. But I couldn't let it distract me.

Thorne's jaw tightened, his eyes darkening. "You don't get to act like you're better than us," he snarled, stepping closer.

Before I could respond, he moved. His hand shot out, grabbing my arm with enough force to make me stumble. "You don't get to act like you're better than us," he repeated, his breath fanning my face.

"Let go," I said, my voice sharp and steady.

But his anger outweighed his restraint. In his rage, he pulled harder, his movements jerky and uncalculated. My footing slipped, my balance failing as I twisted to pull free.

Pain exploded at the back of my head as I hit the edge of the stage, my body crumpling to the cold, unforgiving floor. The world tilted, then went eerily still. The metallic tang of blood filled my mouth, and my vision blurred as their voices floated above me.

"She's bleeding," Aeron muttered, his tone flat as always.

Kael crouched beside me, his hand hovering over my shoulder. "We need to call

someone,” he said, his voice tight with urgency.

“No.” Lucian’s voice was sharp, decisive. “She did this to herself.”

Kael’s head snapped up, his expression a mix of disbelief and anger. “Are you serious? She could be dying, Lucian! That’s a lot of blood.”

“She’s not our problem,” Lucian said coldly, rising from his seat. “Let’s go.”

Ciaran hesitated, his stormy eyes flickering over me one last time. Then, without a word, he turned and followed Lucian out. Aeron pushed himself off the stage, his movements slow and deliberate, as if he had all the time in the world. Kael lingered for a moment longer, his jaw clenched tight, before he stood and shoved his hands into his pockets.

The theater door creaked shut behind them, leaving me alone.

The cold floor pressed against my cheek as I tried to focus my vision. Everything blurred together—the dusty stage, the empty seats, the flickering lights above. My fingers twitched, but my arms felt like lead weights. More blood filled my mouth, making me want to gag.

I needed to move, to get help, but my body wouldn’t cooperate. Each attempt sent waves of dizziness through me, the world spinning faster until I had to close my eyes. The back of my head throbbed, warm liquid pooling beneath me.

“Help,” I whispered, my voice barely a breath in the empty theater. The word echoed back to me, mocking and hollow.

My thoughts drifted to my mom, to the birthday card she’d sent last week. I never wrote back. There were so many things I needed to tell her, so many apologies I

needed to make. The regret hit harder than the pain.

The ceiling lights above me started to dim, or maybe it was my vision failing. I couldn't tell anymore. My chest felt heavy, each breath more difficult than the last. The bond pulled at me, five different directions of emptiness, of rejection, of abandonment.

Tears slid down my temples, mixing with the blood. The irony didn't escape me—dying alone in an abandoned theater, rejected by the very people fate had chosen for me. My body started to feel lighter, almost floating, as the cold crept up from my fingers and toes.

“I'm sorry,” I whispered to no one, my words slurring. “I just wanted... wanted you to...”

The darkness at the edges of my vision grew deeper, heavier. My last conscious thought was of their faces—not cruel or mocking, but as they might have been in another life. Smiling. Caring. Mine.

Then everything faded to black.

They didn't just kill me.

They destroyed me.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

Five

Darkness.

It wasn't just the absence of light; it was a void, heavy and endless, pressing down on me from every direction. My body felt weightless, yet every breath—if I was breathing at all—was an effort. I couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't feel. It was as though the world had folded in on itself, leaving me suspended in nothingness.

Then, a flicker.

Not light exactly, but something less suffocating. A thread of sensation crept back into my awareness—cold, damp, metallic. The theater. I remembered the jagged edge of the stage, the sharp pain at the back of my head, the warmth pooling beneath me. My chest tightened as the memory surged back.

The fall. Their laughter.

And then... nothing.

I gasped, or thought I did. My lungs didn't burn the way they should have, but the instinct was there. Slowly, the darkness receded, and I opened my eyes—or perhaps I had never closed them. The familiar, crumbling theater materialized around me, blurry and distorted, like looking through warped glass.

The silence was deafening. Not the quiet of a late night or an empty room, but the heavy, stifling absence of sound that made my ears ring. I pushed myself up—or tried

to. My arms wavered as though the floor had turned to quicksand beneath me. My chest didn't rise or fall, yet I wasn't suffocating.

"Am I dead?" I whispered, my voice brittle and unfamiliar, like it didn't belong to me anymore. "Is this... the afterlife?"

My knees scraped against the wooden floor as I crawled forward, the jagged edges of broken boards scratching at my hands. The lights above flickered weakly, casting the theater in shifting shadows. I reached for the edge of the stage, my fingers trembling as I pulled myself to stand.

And then I saw it.

Me.

My own body lay crumpled near the foot of the stage, half-hidden in the flickering shadows. The simple black dress I'd chosen with such care clung to my still figure, the fabric now torn and smeared with blood. My legs were bent at unnatural angles, and my head lolled to the side, exposing the gash at the back of my skull where the plank had split the skin.

A strangled noise escaped my throat, somewhere between a gasp and a sob. I stumbled backward, clutching the edge of the stage for support. My own lifeless eyes stared blankly into the void, their once-vivid spark extinguished.

"No," I whispered, shaking my head. "No, no, no..."

But the image didn't waver. It wasn't a trick of the light or a cruel hallucination. It was me—my body. Broken and abandoned, left to rot in this desolate place.

The air around me grew colder, the shadows pressing closer. I staggered forward, an

involuntary urge to touch my body overtaking me. My hand hovered above my face—my face—but I couldn't bring myself to make contact.

"I'm dead," I said, the words tumbling out in a shaky breath. "This is real. I'm... dead."

The theater seemed to groan in response, the creak of its old bones filling the silence. I stumbled back again, tripping over the hem of my dress—no, the dress my body wore. I glanced down at myself, only to realize that I was still dressed the same, the black fabric unmarred by blood or dirt. My skin looked pale, almost translucent, and the faint shimmer of something otherworldly danced along my fingertips.

I collapsed onto the stage, trembling. My gaze darted back to my body, to the pool of blood that had seeped into the wooden floorboards, staining them forever. "Why am I still here?" I whispered. "Why didn't I... move on?"

The silence pressed down on me again, but this time, I felt something else—a pull. It wasn't physical, but it tugged at my very essence, at the invisible threads that bound me to this world. I closed my eyes, focusing on the sensation. The bond stirred within me, faint and fragile, like threads pulling in different directions. Five threads. Five directions.

My mates.

A sob broke from my throat, raw and guttural. "They didn't even look back."

I closed my eyes, focusing on the bonds. I reached for one, my fingers brushing against something unseen. The connection flared, and suddenly, the theater fell away.

Thorne.

His face filled my vision, sharper than memory, more real than a dream. He was in a dimly lit bar, his signature smirk nowhere in sight. He leaned over the counter, gripping the edge so tightly his knuckles turned white. His jaw was clenched, his breath uneven as he stared at the glass in front of him. Regret seeped through the bond, sharp and bitter.

The image shifted, the bond pulling me in a different direction.

Kael.

He was outside, the glow of a cigarette illuminating his face. He leaned against the railing of the dorm balcony, his fingers drumming against the metal as he stared into the distance. The usual arrogance in his expression was replaced by something unreadable, his movements restless. He didn't look at ease, even in his solitude.

Another shift.

Lucian.

He sat in the corner of a crowded room, a drink in his hand as he watched the chaos unfold around him. His posture was relaxed, but his eyes were sharp, scanning the crowd as if searching for something—or someone. The bond trembled, a faint echo of unease threading through it.

Aeron.

He was in the library, the faint glow of his laptop screen casting shadows across his face. His usual detachment was gone, replaced by a furrowed brow and restless movements as he scrolled through page after page of something. His fingers tapped against the desk, his frustration palpable through the bond.

The last thread pulled harder, tighter.

Ciaran.

He stood in his dorm room, his hands buried in his hair as he began pacing back and forth. The storm in his eyes was clearer than ever, his emotions crashing into mine like waves. Anger, guilt, confusion—they bled through the bond, raw and unfiltered.

The threads snapped back, and I was in the theater again, gasping for air I didn't need. My legs gave out beneath me, and I collapsed onto the floor, trembling.

They didn't care. Not enough to stay. Not enough to help. But somewhere, deep in their hearts, they felt something. Regret. Guilt. Fear.

But it wasn't enough.

It would never be enough.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

Six

The theater groaned softly as I drifted back to the stage, the pull of the bonds releasing me just enough to return to this forsaken place. It wasn't a choice—I was anchored here, unable to leave no matter how far I followed the threads of my mates. And no matter how far I tried to flee from it .

I didn't need to look. I'd seen it before. Too many times.

But the pull of morbid fascination, or perhaps sheer disbelief, kept dragging my gaze back. There it was— I was—still crumpled near the stage, exactly where I'd fallen days ago.

No one had found me.

The thought echoed louder than anything else. This place was supposed to be a secret haven for students, a hotspot for underage drinking and reckless antics. The kind of place that would have at least one careless party stumble upon the broken girl lying in a pool of blood. But the silence of the theater said otherwise. No one had come. No one had even cared enough to check.

My body lay sprawled awkwardly across the floor, the black dress I'd worn now warped and stretched in grotesque ways. The once-clean fabric clung to bloated flesh, bulging unnaturally where gases had begun to collect under the skin. My legs, bent at sickening angles, had started to take on a waxy sheen, the pallor shifting into patches of mottled green and purple.

I hovered near the edge of the stage, my translucent fingers curling into fists as I stared. I thought I'd grown numb to the sight. I hadn't.

The blood that pooled beneath my head had turned darker, almost black, seeping into the wood and leaving the edges dry and cracked like old paint. My hair, tangled and sticky with blood, clung to the floorboards in clumps, framing my face like some macabre portrait.

My lips were drawn back slightly, peeling away from my teeth. The foam I'd first noticed leaking from the corner of my mouth had grown worse, the edges now crusted with dried blood. Flies buzzed in lazy circles around my face, their tiny bodies darting to and fro as if savoring their grim feast.

I tried to focus on anything else, but my gaze kept returning to my eyes. Cloudy, dull, and staring into nothing. They hadn't closed. No one had cared enough to close them.

A flicker of motion drew my attention—a faint ripple in the fabric of my dress as my body shifted, just slightly, as if something beneath the surface had stirred. It wasn't life, I knew. It was the body breaking itself down, processes I'd never thought about until now continuing on without me.

I gagged. Or I would have if I still had a throat to burn, lungs to expel the reaction. But I was silent, forced to endure the sickening reality that this... thing was what I'd become.

"She's still here," I muttered bitterly. "No one even noticed."

The theater seemed to respond with a groan, its structure settling like the bones of an old corpse. I stepped back—or floated, or whatever this in-between state let me do—and pressed phantom hands against my temples. If I could've screamed, I might have. But the silence inside me, the numbness of what I was now, kept it all trapped.

My gaze flicked back to the stage, to the girl who'd once been me. I studied her with a detached kind of horror, cataloging every grotesque detail like a forensic scientist might. The swelling of the abdomen, the discoloration creeping up the arms, the faintly sweet and sour odor of decay that lingered in the air, even though I didn't need to breathe.

"This shouldn't have happened," I whispered. My voice was hollow, but the ache behind it was raw. "I shouldn't still be here."

But there she was, the proof of my existence—or what was left of it—sprawled out and rotting in a place no one cared to look. Not my mates. Not the students who partied here. No one.

Tears that I couldn't cry burned in the corners of my soul, a phantom sensation that mocked me. If this place had been as popular as the whispers claimed, someone would have found me by now. Someone should have. Instead, the only visitors I had were the flies and the growing shadows.

The longer I stared, the harder it became to reconcile the truth. The girl on the floor was me, and yet she wasn't. That body was hollow now, a lifeless shell whose purpose had long since ended. But the tragedy of it all—it wasn't just that I'd died. It was that I'd been forgotten so quickly. Left to rot in the silence.

"They didn't even look back," I whispered, my voice trembling. "Not once."

The words lingered in the stale air, unanswered. The bond stirred faintly, pulling at me again, reminding me that somewhere out there, they were alive. Laughing. Moving on. While I stayed tethered to this theater, to this body, to this torment.

I closed my eyes and turned away from the stage. "You didn't deserve this," I murmured to the broken girl left behind.

And with that, I let the bonds drag me away, leaving the girl on the stage behind. Just as everyone else had.

When the pull stopped, I was standing in a sunlit apartment, warm and bright—so painfully alive.

Lucian's apartment.

I recognized it instantly from the few glimpses I'd seen in his social media posts—high ceilings, large windows, and furniture that screamed effortless wealth. He stood by the kitchen island, his back to me as he poured wine into two glasses. His movements were relaxed, confident, as if he had never known the weight of guilt or regret.

A soft laugh pulled my gaze to the couch. Her. The girlfriend. Emma. The one who had always had his attention, always had his heart. She was curled up with a throw blanket, scrolling through her phone with an easy smile on her face. She was beautiful, radiant in a way that seemed impossible to tarnish.

It was a scene I had dreamed of so many times—Lucian smiling, the domestic intimacy, the warmth of a shared space. But in every dream, I was the one he poured wine for, the one he smiled at like that.

Not her.

He turned, carrying the glasses over to her. She looked up, her smile widening as she set her phone aside. "You're spoiling me," she teased, taking the glass.

Lucian shrugged, the corner of his mouth lifting in a smirk. "You deserve it."

The words hit me like a physical blow. My knees buckled slightly, but I caught

myself on the arm of the chair I'd instinctively reached for. Except my hand passed through it, the reminder of my untethered existence slicing through the ache.

They clinked their glasses together, their laughter soft and intimate, like the world outside didn't exist. Like I didn't exist.

The bond throbbed faintly, echoing his emotions. Contentment. Affection. Love.

I wanted to scream.

Instead, I forced myself closer, standing just a few feet from them. My gaze lingered on Lucian's face, tracing the angles and planes I knew so well. He looked the same as always—arrogantly handsome, effortlessly perfect. There wasn't a single crack in his facade, no sign that he was haunted by what had happened. By what they had done.

By me.

The girlfriend reached out, brushing a hand over his arm. "You've been quiet tonight," she said softly. "Everything okay?"

My heart leapt at the question, foolish hope clawing its way to the surface. Maybe this was it. Maybe he'd say something—anything—that hinted at remorse, at regret. Maybe he did feel something, even if he hid it well.

But he just smiled, leaning down to press a kiss to her forehead. "I'm fine," he said easily. "Just thinking about how lucky I am."

The air left my lungs in a rush. Lucky. He was lucky.

I stumbled back, my ghostly steps silent against the pristine hardwood. The warmth of the apartment, the love that filled the air—it was unbearable. My chest felt tight,

the invisible weight pressing down harder with every second I stood there.

She giggled, a light, carefree sound that echoed like a taunt in my ears. Lucian grinned, tipping his glass toward her in a mock toast. “To us,” he said, his voice rich with affection.

I turned away, my hands shaking as I clenched them into fists. I couldn’t watch anymore. I couldn’t stand here and see the life I’d been denied, the happiness he so easily gave to someone else.

The bonds tugged at me again, pulling me back toward the theater, but I resisted. Not yet. I wasn’t ready to go back to the cold, to the sight of my own decaying body lying forgotten on that stage.

Instead, I drifted to the window, looking out at the city bathed in the golden glow of sunset. Cars honked in the distance and chatter floated up from the streets below. Life went on. People went on.

But not me.

I was trapped here, chained to bonds that didn’t want me, to a world that didn’t miss me. And as I watched Lucian kiss her, I realized something that made my chest ache with the force of it.

They were happier without me.

And maybe... maybe I did deserve this after all.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

Seven

The theater had changed.

It wasn't just the stale air thickened with decay or the groans of its aging bones.

I hovered near the rafters, avoiding the stage entirely. I couldn't bear to see it again. Not my body, not the bloated, grotesque shell I had become. And now, it wasn't just me here.

Voices rose from the stage below, low murmurs cutting through the suffocating stillness. The faint glow of flashlights bobbed across the wooden floor, sweeping over the seats and walls before landing on the stage.

"Smell's worse than I expected," a man said, his voice muffled behind what sounded like a mask.

Campus security. Their uniforms marked them as much as their awkward hesitation. They weren't used to this.

Another voice joined in, sharper, more authoritative. "Stay back. Let the police handle this."

Two officers stood near the stage, their presence commanding even as their expressions betrayed discomfort. One crouched by my body, his gloved hand hovering over the gash at the back of my skull. The other stood rigidly nearby, his flashlight trained on the scene.

“Fell from the stage?” one of the officers muttered, his tone half question, half confirmation. “That’s my guess. Blunt force trauma to the head, no signs of foul play.”

“That’s your official call?” the security guard asked, shifting uncomfortably.

“It’s preliminary,” the officer replied, standing. “We’ll wait for the medical examiner, but I don’t see anything suspicious.”

I floated closer, the detachment I’d tried to cling to crumbling with every word.

No signs of foul play. No suspicion.

They didn’t know the truth. They didn’t see how Thorne had grabbed me, that not a single one of my five mates reached out to grab me in time, how all of them turned their backs and walked away while I bled out on the stage.

They would never know.

“Another student?” one of the guards asked hesitantly.

“Most likely,” the officer said, shaking his head. “Damn shame. Poor girl must’ve slipped, hit her head, and no one found her in time.”

Slipped. Hit my head. That was how they’d remember me. An accident. A footnote in someone else’s story.

I wanted to scream, to hurl the truth at them, but all I could do was watch as they continued their work. The silence felt like a curse, a barrier I couldn’t break.

One of the officers radioed in their findings, calling for someone to remove the body.

My body.

I drifted upward, higher into the rafters where their flashlights couldn't reach, as if distance could somehow dull the ache.

But nothing could dull this.

The bonds pulled at me again, insistent and unrelenting. I let them guide me, desperate for anything to drown out the memory of the officers' words, of the way they'd reduced my death to a simple misstep.

When the pull stopped, I found myself in Thorne's apartment.

It was sharp, modern, and meticulously clean. The furniture was sleek and dark, the kind of place that looked more like a magazine spread than a home. It suited him—cold, detached, and polished.

He was standing in the kitchen, shirtless, a glass of something dark and amber in his hand. The woman perched on the counter beside him was laughing, her head tilted back as she toyed with the hem of her dress.

I hated her instantly.

Not because she'd done anything wrong, but because she was here. Because she was laughing with him, touching him, existing in the space I was never allowed to occupy.

Thorne grinned, setting his glass aside as he stepped closer to her. His hand slid up her thigh, and she leaned in, her laughter dissolving into a soft hum of pleasure.

The bond burned, searing through me with a pain so intense I doubled over, clutching

my chest.

It wasn't fair.

He didn't deserve this happiness. He didn't deserve her .

They moved to the bedroom, their laughter trailing behind them. I followed like the ghost I was, hating myself for every step yet unable to look away.

The scene that unfolded was intimate, raw, and excruciatingly painful. Thorne moved with confidence, his hands roaming her body with a familiarity that felt like a betrayal. The bond between us screamed, a violent, pulsing ache that made me clutch my chest again.

Why did it hurt so much? Why did I feel this pain when he was the one who should suffer? I was the one left behind, the one broken and discarded, and yet it was my soul that splintered every time he touched someone else.

Tears I couldn't cry burned in the corners of my soul. The bond tightened, constricted, and I felt myself unraveling.

"Why?" I whispered, my voice cracking. "Why does it still hurt?"

The woman moaned softly, her voice like a dagger in my chest. Thorne's smile was smug, satisfied, as he whispered something I couldn't hear.

I staggered back, the weight of it all pressing down on me. The theater called to me, the bond loosening its grip just enough to let me retreat. I didn't hesitate. I let myself drift back to the theater, the only place that felt like mine anymore.

Yellow tape crisscrossed the stage now, its stark color glaring against the dim light.

My body was gone, replaced by markers and measurements, the residue of an investigation that had already moved on.

The silence was heavier now, thick with finality.

I floated to the edge of the stage, staring down at the space where I had once been. The bloodstains were still there, dark and dried, seeping into the wood like a wound the theater couldn't heal.

They'd taken my body, but not my memory.

I sank onto the stage, curling into myself. My mates were out there, living, laughing, fucking, while I was stuck here, tethered to a crime scene and a bond that refused to let me go.

My chest heaved with silent sobs as the theater groaned softly around me, its shadows wrapping me in their cold embrace. I pressed my hands against the stage, the rough wood scraping against my palms. The bond flickered faintly, tugging at me again, but I didn't follow it this time.

For the first time since my death, I stayed still.

The silence swallowed me whole.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

Eight

Ciaran's thread burned brighter than the rest, flickering with something that felt sharper, more intense. Guilt? Regret? I wasn't sure, but it was enough to latch onto.

He cared. I was certain of it. He had to.

I let the bond guide me, weaving through the empty void and depositing me in his dorm. The air was heavy, stagnant, as though it, too, bore the weight of his emotions.

His desk was cluttered with half-finished assignments and books left open to unread pages. Ciaran sat slumped in his chair, his head in his hands. His foot tapped against the floor in restless rhythm, his other hand twitching against his thigh as though trying to still himself.

"You feel it, don't you?" I whispered, stepping closer. My voice was faint, a breath against the air, but I willed him to hear it.

He flinched, his head snapping up. His stormy eyes darted around the room, scanning the shadows, the corners, the cracks of light spilling in from the hallway. But he didn't see me.

"Ciaran," I said again, louder this time. "It's me."

Still, nothing.

The bond pulsed, urging me forward. I moved closer, close enough to feel the faint

heat radiating from his skin, close enough to see the tension in his jaw, the way his fingers flexed against his leg.

“You have to feel it,” I pleaded, my voice breaking. “I know you do. You’re not like them.”

His head fell back into his hands with a frustrated groan. The sound pierced through me, sharp and raw, and for a moment, I thought he might break—might finally acknowledge what we both knew was there.

But he didn’t.

The bond trembled, a faint spark flickering between us. I reached for it, pouring every ounce of myself into the connection. The room grew colder, frost creeping across the window as the lights flickered faintly. Ciaran’s head shot up again, his gaze snapping to the window. He shivered, rubbing his arms as the chill seeped into the air.

“Ciaran,” I whispered, forcing every ounce of my remaining strength into his name. The bond flared, burning hot, and for a moment, his gaze seemed to linger—like he felt it.

But then he shook his head, running a hand through his hair, and the bond snapped like a rubber band stretched too far. The frost melted, the lights steadied, and I was left standing there, unseen and unheard.

Exhaustion hit me like a wave, pulling me back before I could make contact. My form wavered, and I collapsed into the darkness, letting it drag me back to the theater.

The familiar silence of the stage greeted me like a slap. I slumped against the edge of the stage, my chest heaving with phantom breaths.

“It’s not fair,” I whispered, my voice breaking. “Why can’t you hear me? Why can’t you feel me?”

I pressed my hands to the floor, the cold wood grounding me as tears I couldn’t cry burned in my chest. The bond flared faintly, but I ignored it, too tired to follow its call. Instead, I let the despair wash over me, drowning in the weight of everything I’d lost.

I didn’t know how long I stayed there. Time had lost all meaning in this place. The theater seemed to hold me in its quiet stillness, its familiar shadows offering a strange sense of comfort in a world that had turned unrecognizable. When the pull of the bonds grew too strong to resist, I gave in, letting them guide me once more.

When the bond stirred again, I followed it without hesitation, letting it pull me back to Lucian’s apartment. Why was it always here?

The warmth of the place grated against me, the soft lighting and artfully mismatched furniture feeling like a cruel joke. Everything about it was designed to feel effortlessly lived-in, a sharp contrast to the icy hollowness inside me.

Lucian sat on the couch, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. A drink rested in his hands, forgotten as his sharp eyes scanned the room. The restless tapping of his fingers against the glass echoed faintly, a metronome for his simmering irritation.

Kael stood at the counter, pouring himself a drink with unhurried precision. He swirled the liquid idly, his posture deceptively casual as his gaze flicked toward the others, assessing.

Aeron perched on the edge of the armchair, his posture stiff, a pencil twirling in his fingers. A notebook lay open on the table in front of him, its pages blank save for a single word scrawled at the top. His lips pressed into a tight line as his dark eyes

flicked toward Lucian, catching each subtle movement with unnerving focus.

Ciaran leaned against the wall by the doorway, one hand pressed against his neck as if trying to ease some unseen tension. His brows furrowed slightly, and his gaze kept drifting to the floor. Every so often, his fingers flexed at his side, as though resisting the urge to reach for something—or someone.

The air felt heavy with unspoken words, the kind that choked more than silence ever could. They were all waiting, the tension strung tight between them, but no one seemed willing to break it.

“She’s still not back,” Aeron said suddenly, breaking the silence. His tone was casual, but his words hit me like a blow. Are they finally acknowledging me? “Elise’s been asking around. Says she hasn’t seen Lily in days and that she was going out with someone that night.”

My heart warmed. Elise. My roommate. My friend. She cared. She noticed.

“She’ll figure it out,” Lucian said with a dismissive wave. “People disappear all the time.”

A flicker of irritation crossed Kael’s face. “She’s not exactly subtle, though. If someone starts digging?—”

“Then we’ll deal with it,” Lucian snapped, his voice sharp. “It’s not like she was anything special.”

The air grew thick, pressing down on me like a weight I couldn’t escape. The bond pulsed faintly, tightening around my chest like a vice. My gaze snapped to Ciaran. He stood rigid, his hands flexing at his sides, his eyes fixed on the floor. His silence cut sharper than any words, a prelude to something I wasn’t ready to hear.

“She was always too much,” he muttered finally, the words tumbling out like he hadn’t meant to say them. His voice was quiet, strained, but the impact was deafening. “We didn’t have a choice.”

The room tilted as those words sank in, heavy and suffocating. My breath hitched, my chest seizing with the weight of them. Too much. No choice.

My fists clenched at my sides, and the bond flared violently in response, a searing pain that stole what little strength I had left. I stumbled back, clutching at my chest as if I could claw it out. Their voices grew louder, sharper, cutting through me until all I could hear was a symphony of rejection.

I couldn’t take it anymore.

I fled.

When I returned to the theater, I didn’t even bother looking at the stage. My legs carried me to the corner instinctively, and I collapsed against the wall, the cold wood pressing against my back as I curled in on myself. The dim light flickered above, casting jagged shadows across the empty room, but I didn’t notice. I didn’t care.

“They’re better off without me,” I whispered into the void, my voice trembling, hollow. “They don’t care. They never cared.”

My fingers dug into my palms, sharp and biting. The ache in my chest twisted, the familiar sting of despair morphing into something sharper, darker. It burned through me, stripping away the fragile hope I’d clung to, leaving only raw, unrelenting rage.

“They didn’t have a choice,” I spat bitterly, repeating the excuse that had shattered me. The words tasted vile on my tongue, like poison I couldn’t swallow.

The bond pulsed again, not a chain pulling me down but something far more dangerous—a weapon, volatile and waiting. For the first time, I wasn't sure if it was going to destroy me.

Or if I was going to destroy them.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

Nine

Thorne's apartment felt like a hollow shell, polished and lifeless. The sleek furniture, the dim lighting, the scent of expensive whiskey faint in the air—it was all so meticulously curated. Just like him.

He sat on the couch, head tipped back against the cushions, staring at the ceiling like it held answers he couldn't find. A half-empty glass dangled from his fingers, the amber liquid catching the light as it swirled lazily with his restless movements.

I drifted closer, skimming along the edges of the room, careful not to get too close. Everything about this place was so perfectly in place, so controlled, that my presence felt like an intrusion.

My gaze fell on him again, on the way his hand tightened imperceptibly around the glass. His jaw clenched, then relaxed, his eyes hooded but far from at ease. It was strange, seeing him like this—unguarded. Alone.

“You're not as invincible as you think,” I muttered, the words more for me than him.

I turned toward the kitchen counter, my attention catching on the chair nearest me. The urge hit before I could stop it—an ache to feel something, anything, in this empty shell of an existence.

Slowly, I reached out. My fingers hovered over the back of the chair, and for the first time since my death, I felt resistance. Solid, tangible.

My chest tightened with a jolt of shock, and I pressed down harder, my translucent hand flickering as it met the cold wood.

The chair wobbled.

Energy surged through me, sharp and electric, filling the void where my soul should have been. I pushed harder, gripping the chair's back with both hands, and it tipped. The moment it hit the ground with a sharp crash, an invisible force yanked at me, hollowing me out.

I staggered—or at least, it felt like staggering. My form flickered as exhaustion slammed into me like a wave, dragging me under.

The sound of the chair hitting the floor startled Thorne, snapping him out of his haze. His head shot up, his eyes narrowing as he scanned the room.

“What the fuck?” he muttered, his voice sharp and clipped.

He stood, moving toward the chair with the cautious precision of someone who didn't trust what he was seeing. He crouched, brushing his fingers over the edge of the seat before setting it upright.

I backed away, my energy drained to the point where I felt like I might dissolve entirely. My legs—or whatever I had now—wavered beneath me as I pressed myself against the far wall.

Thorne lingered near the chair, his hand still resting on it. His brows furrowed, a flicker of something uncertain crossing his face.

“Great,” he muttered, standing abruptly. “Now I'm hearing things.” He tossed back the rest of his whiskey and retreated to the couch, shaking his head like he could

dismiss the disturbance.

I stared at the chair, my mind spinning. I'd touched it. I'd felt it. I'd moved it.

But it had cost me.

Every second my hands had been on the wood, I'd felt the life drain out of me—or whatever was left of me. The effort had been exhilarating and terrifying, a reminder that I was still tied to the physical world, even if I didn't belong to it anymore.

"Is this normal?" I whispered, my voice shaking as I slid to the floor.

Thorne's breathing steadied, his posture sinking back into lazy indifference as he lounged on the couch. For him, the moment was over. A random noise, nothing more.

For me, it was everything.

Thorne's apartment faded into the background as the exhaustion from toppling the chair settled deep into my core. My form felt thinner, lighter, as though I'd burned through what little energy I had left just to prove I still existed. But the flicker of triumph at finally making contact with the physical world lingered, cutting through the weight of despair like a sliver of light.

I could do this again. I had to.

Hovering near the edge of the kitchen, I focused on the half-empty glass of water sitting on the counter. Thorne had left it there earlier, abandoned in favor of a stronger drink. My gaze locked onto it, my thoughts narrowing to a single point of focus.

Move.

I poured everything I had into the command, willing the glass to shift even slightly. The apartment grew colder, the lights dimming just enough to notice. I watched my form flicker, strained and weak, but I didn't stop. The bond pulsed faintly, stirring with an energy that wasn't mine, and I seized it.

A faint tremor ran through the counter, barely noticeable, but enough to send a ripple through the water in the glass. My chest tightened with an emotion I couldn't name—elation, maybe, or fear.

The glass didn't topple. It didn't shatter. But the ripple was enough.

I staggered back—or at least, the ghostly equivalent of staggering. My energy waned again, my form flickering like a dying light bulb. I slumped against the wall, clutching at nothing, my breaths phantom gasps that never seemed to reach my lungs.

"It's... possible," I murmured, the words trembling on my lips. "I can still touch this world."

The realization sent a shiver through me, excitement and dread intertwining in equal measure. I wasn't entirely powerless. But whatever I'd just done had taken more out of me than I expected. The bond throbbed faintly, like a heartbeat just out of reach, and for the first time, I felt something other than hatred for it.

Maybe this wasn't just a chain keeping me tethered. Maybe it was fuel.

Thorne's footsteps echoed in the distance, pulling me from my thoughts. He was in the living room now, sprawled on the couch with his phone in hand, completely unaware of the flicker of energy I'd unleashed in his space. His indifference sparked a sharp ache in my chest, but I shoved it aside.

I drifted toward the nearest lamp, my eyes narrowing at the bulb. The light seemed to

hum faintly, its glow steady and unchanging. Could I touch it? Could I dim it, just for a moment?

The bond stirred again, feeding me just enough strength to try. I reached out, my hand trembling as I focused on the filament inside. The air around me grew colder, the light flickering once, then twice. Thorne glanced up from his phone, his brow furrowing as he scanned the room.

The flickering stopped, and I stumbled back, drained but triumphant. My form wavered, threatening to dissolve entirely, but I clung to the remnants of my strength.

It was working. Slowly, painfully, but it was working.

I spent what felt like hours testing my limits, pushing the boundaries of what I could do. A chair slid an inch across the floor. A door creaked open just enough to catch the air. The flicker of lights became more consistent, each pulse of energy dragging me closer to the edge of exhaustion.

And yet, with every attempt, I felt the faintest sliver of growth. The bond's energy wasn't infinite, but it responded to proximity. The closer I was to Thorne, the stronger I felt, even if the strength was fleeting.

It wasn't fair. The bond that had tethered me to this hollow existence was now my only source of power. The same bond that had let them reject me, break me, destroy me.

My gaze drifted to Thorne, still lounging on the couch as though nothing had happened. He scrolled through his phone with casual indifference, his lips twitching into a faint smirk at something he read. The urge to shatter the glass beside him, to force him to see me, surged through me like fire.

But I wasn't strong enough for that. Not yet.

Instead, I let myself sink into the shadows, my energy dwindling as the bond throbbed faintly in the back of my mind. I didn't know how far I could push myself before I unraveled completely. But for the first time since my death, I felt the spark of something I thought I'd lost.

Hope.

Not the soft, fragile hope I'd clung to in life. This was darker, sharper. A hope forged from desperation and rage, from the relentless need to prove that I wasn't gone.

That I wasn't done. Not yet.

Ten

Out of all their places, I hated Lucian's apartment the most. For some reason, it was always entirely too silent. It was the kind of silence that made me itch, the kind that left too much room for the noise in my head to take over.

I hovered near the far wall, my form flickering faintly as I watched him and her. She was perched on the couch beside him, her phone cradled in her lap, her legs tucked under her like she owned the place. Her laughter rang out, soft and sweet, as she leaned into Lucian, brushing his arm with a practiced ease that made my stomach churn.

Lucian tilted his head toward her, his smirk lazy as he sipped his beer. He looked comfortable, relaxed, like nothing in the world could touch him. Like my death hadn't even been a ripple in his perfect little pond.

I drifted closer, drawn by the faint buzz of the bond, even though I knew it would only hurt. My gaze flicked to her phone, curiosity gnawing at me. Her thumb darted across the screen, typing with a speed that made me pause.

The messages she sent were stark and glaring in the glow of her phone:

God, I can't wait to get out of here. Watching him brood is exhausting.

A bubble popped up, her friend typing back.

Bet you wish it was me there instead of him.

Her smile widened as she replied, tilting the screen away from Lucian, who was too busy scrolling through his own phone to notice.

You have no idea. Lucian's good for dinners and gifts, but you? You're my real fun.

I froze, the words cutting through me sharper than any knife.

She paused, then added another text, the audacity making my chest tighten with rage.

Tomorrow? After he's asleep?

The reply was instant.

You know it, baby. Can't wait to hear all the boring details about his sad little life while I fuck you properly.

The phone dinged, but she didn't bother to hide her smug grin. Her hand brushed Lucian's thigh absentmindedly, her voice soft as she said, "You're quiet tonight. Everything okay?"

He glanced at her, the faintest hint of a smile playing on his lips. "Yeah. Just tired."

"Tired of me yet?" she teased, her tone light, playful, and full of lies.

"Never," Lucian replied, shaking his head as he leaned back.

She laughed, tucking her phone against her chest as she shifted closer to him. Her other hand reached for his drink, stealing a sip like it was some cute little inside joke.

I wanted to scream.

The bond between us throbbed violently, sending a wave of nausea crashing over me. My chest burned, the phantom ache spreading until it felt like my whole body might shatter.

This is what I died for?

The thought roared in my head, louder than the bond, louder than her laughter. This was the life I was tethered to, the person he chose over me—a liar, a cheat, someone who didn't even care about him beyond what he could give her.

The lamp beside her flickered, just once, but it was enough to make her pause.

“What was that?” she asked, glancing toward the light.

“Bad wiring,” Lucian said, brushing it off as he stood. “Want another drink?”

“Always,” she said with a grin, handing him her glass. As soon as he turned his back, she snatched her phone again, typing something too quick for me to catch.

I backed away, my fists clenched as a new kind of heat coursed through me—hot and sharp, burning away the edges of my despair. This wasn't fair. It wasn't right.

I drifted closer to the lamp, focusing on the bulb. The bond pulsed faintly, feeding me just enough energy to push. The light flickered again, brighter this time, making her flinch.

“What's wrong with that thing?” she asked, setting her phone down.

Lucian returned, handing her the glass without even glancing at the lamp. “It's fine. Don't worry about it.”

But I wasn't done.

I pressed harder, the lamp flickering wildly now, casting jagged shadows across the room. She shifted nervously, her smile faltering.

"Lucian," she said, her voice tinged with unease. "Are you sure it's not going to, like, blow up or something?"

He frowned, glancing at the light as it steadied again. "It's fine," he said firmly, though his tone was less certain.

I stepped back, my form flickering as the effort drained me. But the anger stayed, stronger than the exhaustion, louder than the despair. My thoughts running in circles.

This was what I died for. What I'd bled out in a filthy, forgotten theater for.

For a liar with pretty eyes and a phone full of secrets?

I stood in the corner of the room, watching him lounge on the couch, oblivious to everything around him. His girlfriend sat beside him, her fingers idly swiping through her phone while Lucian scrolled aimlessly on his own. Her expression was serene, her lips tugging into a soft smile as her thumb hovered over her screen.

But I knew better now.

If I leaned in close, I could see the texts she hadn't deleted. The smile that wasn't for Lucian. The lies she crafted so effortlessly, her fingers dancing across the screen with practiced ease to an entirely different conversation than the one she had just minutes before.

I can't stop thinking about last night *winking emoji*

My chest tightened, the flames of my anger licking higher.

“Last night,” I echoed, bitterness creeping into my tone.

The room flickered faintly, the lights dimming just for a moment. Lucian glanced up from his phone, his brow furrowing as he looked at the lamp.

“Bulb’s going out,” he muttered, mostly to himself.

His girlfriend didn’t even look up. She hummed noncommittally, still engrossed in her private little affair.

It wasn’t fair.

I couldn’t see my mom. Or Elise. Or Jenna. The people who actually mattered, who might have cared that I was gone. They must be so upset now that my body has been found. But instead of trying whatever ghostly bullshit I could do now to try to comfort them, I was tethered here to them .

And they didn’t deserve it.

I clenched my fists, my form flickering faintly as my anger surged. The glass on the coffee table trembled, the liquid rippling inside. Lucian’s head snapped toward it, his frown deepening.

“What the hell?”

The girlfriend finally glanced up, her gaze darting between him and the glass.
“What’s wrong?”

Lucian didn’t answer, leaning forward to pick up the glass. He turned it in his hand,

inspecting it like it might reveal some kind of answer.

The bond pulsed faintly, a tug of energy flowing into me. I didn't notice it at first, too lost in my anger, but as I watched Lucian rub his temples, the realization hit.

He was tired. No, more than that—he looked drained.

And I'd caused it.

I felt a smirk curve on my face. The chair nearest the window scraped against the floor, sliding just an inch but enough to make the sound echo. Lucian's girlfriend jumped, her eyes widening as she clutched her phone tighter.

“What was that?”

Lucian shook his head, standing as he scanned the room. “I don't know.” He ran a hand through his hair, the tension in his shoulders visible even as he tried to play it off. “Probably just a draft or something.”

The girlfriend didn't look convinced. She pulled the blanket tighter around herself, her eyes darting toward the shadows in the corner.

I didn't feel guilty. Not even a little.

If anything, I felt stronger.

I moved toward the lamp, letting my anger guide me, and brushed my fingers against the bulb. It flickered violently, casting erratic shadows across the room. Lucian winced, pressing a hand to his temple as the bond throbbed faintly.

“Dammit,” he muttered, grabbing the switch and turning it off entirely.

The girlfriend stood abruptly, wrapping the blanket around herself like armor. "I'm going to bed," she said quickly, her voice tight.

Lucian didn't stop her. He didn't even look at her as she disappeared into the hallway, his focus fixed on the lamp, the glass, the chair.

I hovered near him, watching the tension in his jaw, the frustration that creased his brow. He didn't understand what was happening. None of them did.

And that was fine.

"Feel that?" I whispered, my voice low and venomous. "That's just the beginning."

I turned my attention to the blinds, letting them sway faintly as though caught by an unseen breeze. The sound was subtle, almost imperceptible, but it made Lucian's shoulders stiffen.

He stood abruptly, pacing toward the window and yanking the blinds still. His breath came faster now, uneven, his hand twitching at his side.

The bond pulsed again, another wave of energy flowing into me as his fatigue deepened. He stumbled slightly, catching himself on the edge of the couch.

"What the hell is wrong with me?" he muttered, his voice low and strained.

I smiled, a sharp, bitter thing that didn't feel like me.

"Everything," I said softly. "And you're just finally feeling it."

The exhaustion hit me like a hammer, the surge of power fading as quickly as it came. I slumped against the wall, my form flickering faintly as I fought to stay

upright. The bond quieted, retreating back into its steady hum, but the satisfaction lingered.

I was learning. Growing.

The apartment blurred around me as the pull of the bond faded, leaving me to drift back to the theater. I collapsed onto the stage, the familiar chill of the wood grounding me as I tried to catch phantom breaths that never came.

Lucian wasn't the only one who could feel me now. They all would.

Fucking finally.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

Eleven

Kael's dorm was in shambles. Not his usual calculated chaos, but the real kind—unhinged and frantic. Drawers hung open, clothes were scattered across the floor, and a chair was overturned near the desk. It was beautiful in a way, watching him unravel.

He paced the room, his hand raking through his hair as he muttered under his breath. "Where the fuck is it? I just had it. I just had it."

I lingered near the desk, watching as he crouched to rifle through a pile of papers. His movements were sharp, desperate, like he was one wrong step away from tearing the whole room apart.

He shoved the papers aside with a frustrated huff, his hands moving to the edges of the desk. He gripped it so hard his knuckles turned white, his breath coming in short, sharp bursts.

"It has to be here," he muttered, his voice clipped.

I floated closer, my gaze locking onto the shiny little coin he was so desperate to find. It was tucked neatly beneath his jacket on the chair—right where he'd already looked. Twice.

Kael turned suddenly, his eyes scanning the room. "Okay, think," he said, almost laughing at himself. "Where did I have it last?"

The laugh was hollow, humorless, tinged with just enough disbelief to make me grin.

I waited until he was halfway to the closet before brushing my hand against the chair. The jacket shifted, sliding just enough to reveal the coin. It gleamed faintly in the dim light, taunting him with its perfect, misplaced presence.

He froze mid-step, his head snapping toward the desk. His brows furrowed as he stared at the coin, and for a moment, he didn't move.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," he muttered, stalking toward the desk. He snatched the coin up with a sigh, shaking his head as he dropped into the chair. "I'm so tired. That's all this is. I'm just...tired."

I drifted closer, biting back a laugh as he slumped against the chair, flipping the coin idly between his fingers. His movements were slower this time, less precise, like the weight of exhaustion was finally catching up to him.

But I wasn't done.

The bond pulsed faintly, feeding me just enough energy to keep going. I brushed my hand against the desk again, the faintest flicker of energy sliding the coin from his fingers. It hit the floor with a soft clink, rolling under the bed before Kael even realized it was gone.

"What the—" He straightened, his head snapping toward the sound. His hand hovered in the air for a moment before he cursed under his breath, pushing himself up from the chair. "This isn't funny anymore."

I drifted to the bed, watching as he crouched to peer underneath. His hand darted out, brushing against the coin just before I nudged it farther out of reach.

Kael froze, his hand still stretched toward the coin. “No,” he said, shaking his head. “Nope. That didn’t just happen.”

He grabbed the coin on his second attempt, his grip tighter this time, like he was afraid it might disappear again. He straightened slowly, his shoulders stiff as he held it up to the light.

“You’re fine,” he muttered to himself, pacing back toward the desk. “It’s fine. I’m fine.”

But I still wasn’t done.

I moved closer, brushing my hand against the desk once more. The bond pulsed, sharper this time, feeding me a surge of energy that sent the coin flying from his hand. It hit the desk, bounced off the edge, and landed with a soft thud on the rug.

Kael froze, his breath catching as his gaze darted toward the sound. His hands clenched into fists at his sides, his jaw tightening as he let out a low, frustrated growl.

“This isn’t real,” he said, his voice sharp and brittle. “I’m just tired. That’s all. I’m?—”

The chair nearest the desk slid an inch across the floor, the sound scraping against the silence like a scream.

Kael spun around, his eyes wide and wild. “Who’s there?” he demanded, his voice cracking slightly. He backed toward the door, the coin clutched tightly in his hand. “This isn’t funny, okay? If this is some kind of prank?—”

The bond flared again, feeding me a final surge of energy that sent the lamp flickering violently. Shadows danced across the walls, jagged and erratic, as the

temperature in the room plummeted.

Kael's breath came in sharp, uneven gasps as he backed into the desk, his free hand gripping the edge like it might ground him. His eyes darted around the room, searching for something—anything—that could explain what was happening.

But he wouldn't find it. Not yet.

"Get it together," he muttered to himself, his voice shaking. He flipped the coin in his hand, the motion frantic and uneven. "You're fine. You're just?—"

The coin slipped from his fingers again, hitting the floor with a metallic clink that echoed louder than it should have. Kael stared at it, his chest heaving as his hand twitched at his side.

I drifted back to the corner, my form flickering faintly as the effort drained me. The bond quieted, retreating into a steady hum as exhaustion began to settle in.

Kael crouched to pick up the coin again, his hand trembling as he clutched it tightly. He sank onto the edge of the bed, his head in his hands, his breath ragged and uneven.

"This isn't happening," he whispered, his voice barely audible. "It's not real. It's not?—"

I smiled, a sharp, bitter thing that felt foreign on my face.

"Oh, Kael," I cooed, my voice dripping with satisfaction. "You're not losing it. Not yet."

Twelve

Campus at night felt like a graveyard. The buildings stood tall and silent, their windows glowing faintly, like the dull embers of a fire long forgotten. Pathways that were usually crowded and alive during the day stood empty now, the only sound my footsteps crunching against the gravel.

I didn't know where I was going. I didn't care.

My breath misted in the cold air, dissipating as quickly as it formed, just like every thought I tried to push away. The thought of the bond tugged at the edge of my mind, faint and persistent, a constant reminder of what I had done. Of what we had all done.

I shoved my hands deeper into my pockets, my fingers curling into fists. It didn't matter how far I walked or how many times I told myself to let it go. Her face was there, waiting for me the moment I closed my eyes. The way she'd looked at me—pleading, broken, desperate—like I was some kind of monster.

No, not some kind. I was a monster.

The streetlights buzzed faintly above me, their flickering light casting long shadows across the pavement. I couldn't decide if the sound was comforting or maddening. It was something, at least. Better than the silence that clawed at my ears when I was alone in my dorm.

Better than the sound of her voice in my head.

“You had a choice,” I muttered, the words bitter on my tongue. My voice sounded foreign to me, like it belonged to someone else. Someone stronger. Someone braver. Someone who hadn’t stood in that theater and let it happen.

I rubbed my eyes, the image of her on the stage burned into the backs of my eyelids. Her wide, frightened eyes. The way she stumbled back, her hands reaching for something—anything—to stop her fall. The sickening crack when she hit the stage.

My stomach churned, bile rising in my throat. I doubled over, gripping the edge of a bench as the memory replayed in vivid detail. Her blood pooling beneath her head. The way none of us moved. The way I didn’t move.

She looked at me. Even then, she had looked at me, like I could save her.

And I hadn’t.

I dragged myself upright, my breath hitching as I swallowed hard. The cold air burned my lungs, but it didn’t clear my head. Nothing could clear my head. Not when every step I took on this empty campus felt like walking through her ghost.

“I didn’t mean to,” I whispered, my voice cracking. “I didn’t mean for it to go that far.”

The words felt hollow, even to me. What did it matter if I didn’t mean it? Intentions didn’t undo what had already been done. They didn’t bring her back.

I veered off the main path, my feet carrying me toward the theater without thinking. My chest tightened as the building came into view, its darkened facade looming against the night sky. I froze, my breath hitching as I stared at the boarded windows and the peeling paint.

I hadn't been back here since that night. I couldn't.

But my legs moved anyway, dragging me forward until I stood at the edge of the steps. The door creaked faintly in the wind, and for a moment, I thought about going inside. About standing on that stage and staring at the stain that wouldn't come out.

I turned away instead, my hands shaking as I shoved them back into my pockets. The night pressed in around me, heavy and suffocating, and I started walking again, anywhere but here.

I wanted to ignore the bond, to shove it away, but it was impossible to ignore. Always there, always pulling, always reminding me of what I couldn't change.

I hated it. I hated her for existing. For forcing this bond on us.

But mostly, I hated myself.

"She deserved better," I muttered, my voice barely audible. The words echoed in my head, louder and louder until they drowned out everything else.

I thought about the night in the theater, the way we'd all laughed like it was some kind of joke. Like we weren't tearing her apart piece by piece.

Kael's sneer. Thorne's taunts. Lucian's smirk. Aeron's nonchalance.

And me. Just standing there. Just... watching.

"We had a choice," I said again, my voice shaking. "We had a choice, and we chose wrong."

My feet carried me toward the library, its tall glass windows glowing faintly in the

distance. The lights inside were dim, most of the students gone for the night, but the building still held a strange sense of life. Like it was always watching, always waiting.

I stepped inside, the warmth of the building washing over me like a weight I didn't deserve. The smell of old books and dust filled the air, and for a moment, I let myself breathe it in, hoping it might ground me.

It didn't.

I wandered through the aisles, my fingers brushing against the spines of books without really seeing them. My mind was elsewhere—back in the theater, back on the stage, back to the moment when everything shattered.

She'd been so hopeful when she walked in that night. So fucking beautiful. I remembered the way her eyes lit up when she saw us, like she thought we'd finally accepted her. Like she thought this was the beginning of something new.

And we'd destroyed her. Just like I feared we would.

"We had no choice," I whispered, repeating the lie I'd told myself a hundred times.

But it wasn't true. We did have a choice. And I chose wrong.

Was the alternative that bad? The choice where she was mine? I sank into one of the chairs near the back of the library, my head in my hands. The silence pressed down on me, suffocating and relentless, until I thought I might scream just to break it.

I clenched my fists, the words tangling in my throat as the bonds stirred again.

I'd thought about leaving. About disappearing and starting over somewhere far away

from this place and everything it held. But the bond wouldn't let me. It tied me here, to this campus, to this guilt, to her.

But even that was a lie.

The bond wasn't stopping me from leaving. I just didn't deserve to leave. I didn't deserve to forget. If she never got to leave this place, why do I deserve to?

The clock on the wall ticked loudly, each second dragging by like an eternity. I stared at it, my mind blank and buzzing all at once, until the numbers blurred together.

What was I supposed to do? How was I supposed to fix this?

The answer was simple.

I couldn't.

I pushed myself up from the chair, my legs shaking as I stumbled toward the exit. The night air hit me like a slap, sharp and cold, but it was better than the suffocating warmth inside.

The bonds throbbed faintly, pulling me toward the dorms, toward the others. But I couldn't face them. Not tonight. Not when I could still hear her voice, still see her face, still feel the weight of her final moments pressing down on my chest.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, my voice breaking.

But the words meant nothing now—too little, too late, lost to the night like a breath that would never reach her.

And I kept walking.

Thirteen

The café smelled like burnt coffee and stale pastries, the kind of place that was meant to feel cozy but just felt tired. Aeron sat in the booth across from me, scrolling through his phone with the same detached expression he always wore. He looked up when I slid into the seat, his brow raising slightly.

“Didn’t think you were the social type these days,” he said, tucking his phone into his pocket.

“Didn’t think you were either,” I shot back, shrugging out of my jacket. “Surprised you’re not holed up in the library or something.”

He smirked faintly, leaning back in the booth. “Needed a change of scenery. Thorne’s unbearable, Kael’s losing his mind, and Lucian... well, you know.”

I nodded, not trusting myself to respond. The bond flickered faintly in the back of my mind, that same hollow echo it always was, a reminder of what should have been but wasn’t. It gnawed at me, a thread tied to nothing, pulling me toward memories I couldn’t face.

“Don’t you ever get tired of this?” I asked suddenly, the words tumbling out before I could stop them.

Aeron’s gaze sharpened. “Tired of what?”

“Pretending,” I said, leaning forward. “Acting like nothing happened. Like

everything's fine."

His smirk faded, replaced by something harder, colder. "Careful, Ciaran," he said, his voice low. "You're starting to sound reckless."

"Reckless?" I repeated, scoffing. "I'm not the one acting like?—"

"Like what?" Aeron cut in, his tone sharp. "Like someone who doesn't want to draw attention? You think talking about this here, where anyone could hear, is a good idea?"

I glanced around the café, my chest tightening as I realized how loud I'd been. The place wasn't crowded, but there were enough people to make me regret my outburst. A couple of students sat near the counter, their heads bent over textbooks. The barista was busy wiping down a machine, barely paying us any attention. Still, Aeron's words hit like a warning shot.

"You think they're listening?" I muttered, my voice low now.

"I think you shouldn't be taking chances," Aeron replied, his eyes narrowing. "We're not exactly in a position to be careless, are we?"

I leaned back, crossing my arms as I tried to bite back the surge of frustration bubbling in my chest. "Fine," I said tightly. "We won't talk about it."

"Good," Aeron said, leaning forward, his voice dropping. "Because the last thing we need is someone putting two and two together. Especially about... her."

The mention of her sent a sharp pang through me. I clenched my fists under the table, the bond flaring faintly in response. It didn't feel like her anymore. It didn't feel like anything. Just a hollow, lifeless thing that refused to let me forget.

“She didn’t deserve it,” I muttered, my voice barely audible.

Aeron sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. “No, she didn’t. But saying it out loud isn’t going to change anything.”

“You don’t feel it?” I asked, leaning forward again. “The bond? The way it’s?—”

“Not dead?” Aeron finished, his voice flat. “Yeah, I feel it. Every damn day. But it doesn’t matter, Ciaran. She’s gone.”

I stared at him, the weight of his words sinking in. She’s gone. It was the truth, but it felt wrong, like an open wound that refused to heal.

“She looked at me,” I said quietly, my voice shaking. “That night. Before she fell. She looked at me like?—”

“Stop,” Aeron snapped, his eyes darting around the café. “You’re going to get us in trouble.”

I swallowed hard, forcing myself to look away. The students near the counter were still buried in their books, oblivious to us, but Aeron’s words made me hyper-aware of every glance, every sound.

“You’re right,” I muttered, the bitterness in my voice unmistakable. “Why bother talking about it? Doesn’t change anything, right?”

“Exactly,” Aeron said, his tone softening just enough to catch me off guard. “Ciaran, I get it. I do. But we can’t fix this. All we can do is move forward.”

I laughed, the sound dry and hollow. “Move forward? Is that what you’re doing? Because it looks to me like you’re just running from it.”

“And what are you doing?” Aeron shot back, his gaze sharp. “Sulking? Beating yourself up? What’s that accomplishing?”

I opened my mouth to argue, but the words caught in my throat. He was right. I wasn’t accomplishing anything. I was just... stuck. Trapped in this endless loop of guilt and regret, with no way out.

“She deserved better,” I said finally, my voice breaking.

Aeron didn’t respond right away. He just stared at me, his expression unreadable. When he finally spoke, his voice was softer, almost reluctant. “Yeah,” he said. “She did.”

The bond flickered again, faint and empty, and for a moment, I thought I felt something. A whisper of her. But it was gone as quickly as it came, leaving only the hollow ache behind.

I pushed myself up from the booth, my legs feeling like lead. “I need some air.”

Aeron didn’t try to stop me. He just watched as I walked away, his gaze heavy, like he knew there was nothing he could say to pull me out of this.

The night air hit me like a slap, cold and biting, but it was better than the suffocating warmth of the café. The bond was quiet now, retreating into the background, but its weight was still there, pressing down on my chest.

She was dead. It made me want to be dead too.

Fourteen

Warning: On-screen Suicide

The ceiling tiles blurred as I lay on my bed, staring up at nothing. Tonight, exhaustion dulled everything—my body, my chest, my thoughts. Breathing took effort. Existing felt like a punishment.

I turned my head, the faint glow of my alarm clock casting jagged shadows across the room. 3:12 a.m. The time didn't matter. It hadn't mattered for a while now.

The bond was dead. She was dead. And I... I wasn't sure what I was anymore. My mind wouldn't shut off. It kept replaying her face in that moment—the way her wide, desperate eyes locked on mine. The crack of her skull against the stage. The way I just stood there, frozen, as the others walked away.

I'd thought time would dull it. That maybe if I filled my days with enough noise, enough distractions, I could bury it. But the silence always came back, louder and sharper than before. It clawed at me, tearing me apart from the inside out.

I pressed my hands to my face, my palms digging into my eyes as if I could scrub the image of her out of my head. Nothing helped. Not music, not workouts, not the stupid little routines I'd built to keep myself grounded.

Everything I used to love felt meaningless. The things that used to bring me even the faintest bit of joy now felt like hollow echoes of a life I didn't deserve to live.

My chest ached, the pain so deep and constant that I couldn't remember what it felt like to breathe without it. It wasn't just guilt. It was something bigger, something that consumed me entirely. Guilt, grief, anger, shame—it all swirled together until it became this heavy, choking weight I couldn't carry anymore.

I sat up, my legs swinging over the edge of my bed. My hands trembled as I gripped the mattress, my breaths coming in shallow gasps. My mind raced, the thoughts circling like vultures.

I couldn't do this anymore.

In that moment, the realization settled over me, cold and absolute. I couldn't keep living like this—if you could even call this living. I was trapped in a loop, a constant replay of that night, that moment, her face.

I needed it to stop.

My gaze drifted to the kitchenette, to the small counter cluttered with dishes I hadn't bothered to clean. My mind ran through the options like a checklist, methodical and detached.

Pills? No. I'd probably vomit them up before they worked. Too messy. Too uncertain. Slitting my wrists? I didn't have a sharp enough razor. And even if I did, the thought of watching the blood pool out, the pain of it—it was too much. Hanging? What would I even use? The idea was laughable in its futility.

My eyes flicked to the toaster sitting on the counter. The light from the streetlamp outside hit it just right, casting a soft glow across its sleek, metal surface. My heart stuttered, my mind latching onto the thought before I could second-guess it.

It would be fast. Quiet. Final.

Before I even realized what I was doing, I was on my feet. My movements were automatic, robotic, like I wasn't entirely in control of my own body. My mind was numb, my chest hollow, and for the first time in weeks, my muscles felt relaxed.

The toaster was heavier than I expected as I picked it up, its cord dangling limply. I carried it into the bathroom, setting it carefully on the counter beside the sink. The tub stared back at me, empty and waiting.

I turned on the faucet, the sound of rushing water filling the silence. It was almost comforting, the way it drowned out the noise in my head. Steam curled upward, fogging the mirror, blurring my reflection until it didn't even look like me anymore.

My hands shook as I plugged in the toaster, the hum of electricity buzzing faintly against the air. I tested the cord, making sure it was long enough to reach the tub. It was.

The water filled quickly, almost too quickly. My chest tightened as I turned off the faucet, the sound fading into silence once more. The tub was warm, the steam rising around me like a blanket.

I stepped in not even bothering to take off my pajama pants and the heat bit at my skin, but I barely felt it. I sank down, the water enveloping me, its weight pressing against my chest. My breathing steadied, my hands resting limply on my thighs.

This was it.

I reached for the toaster, my fingers brushing against the cold metal. It felt solid, grounding, in a way I hadn't felt in weeks. My chest tightened, but it wasn't fear. It was relief.

The world felt quiet for the first time in so long. The noise in my head dulled,

replaced by a strange kind of acceptance. This was the right choice. The only choice.

I lifted the toaster, the cord dragging behind it, and held it above the water. My hands trembled, but my grip was steady. I closed my eyes, my breath hitching as I whispered the only words I could manage.

“I’m sorry.”

The lights flickered.

My eyes snapped open, my chest tightening as the bulb above me dimmed and flared, casting jagged shadows across the room. The water rippled, tiny waves breaking the surface.

The toaster slipped from my hands, plunging into the tub with a deafening splash.

Pain exploded through my body, sharp and searing, like fire coursing through my veins. My muscles locked, my chest heaving as the electricity tore through me, lighting up every nerve in my body.

I couldn’t move. I couldn’t breathe. My vision blurred, the edges darkening as the pain reached its peak. And then?—

Nothing.

The silence returned, heavier than before. My chest didn’t ache anymore. My hands didn’t tremble. The weight pressing down on me was gone, replaced by something colder, emptier.

I blinked, the world around me shifting and twisting like a mirage. The bathroom faded, the tub disappearing into the darkness. I stood, my legs steady, my body light.

And there she was.

Lily stood in the corner, her translucent form glowing faintly in the dim light. Her lips curved into a smirk, her eyes gleaming with something I couldn't place.

"Finally," she said, her voice low and amused. "I was starting to think you didn't have it in you."

My chest tightened, the realization hitting me like a punch to the gut.

She'd been here. Watching. Waiting. Encouraging.

"Lily," I whispered, my voice shaking.

Fifteen

The steam from the still-warm water clung to the tile walls, heavy and oppressive. The faint metallic tang of electricity hung in the air, mingling with the damp smell of scorched metal. He stood there, dead yet not gone, staring at me like I was some ghostly miracle instead of the consequence of his own cruelty.

“You’re...” His voice cracked, shaking as he stumbled over the word. “You’re here.”

I leaned casually against the sink, my arms folded. “What gave it away?” I asked coldly, nodding toward the tub, where his lifeless body floated face-down.

He flinched, his eyes darting to his own corpse and back to me. “I—I didn’t know,” he stammered. “I didn’t think...”

“No,” I cut him off, my voice sharp enough to make him wince. “You didn’t think. That’s your problem.”

The silence that followed was thick, suffocating. Ciaran’s mouth opened, but no sound came out. He looked hollow, his usually sharp demeanor dulled to nothing.

“Why are you still here?” he whispered finally. His voice was barely audible over the faint dripping of water from the faucet.

I laughed, the sound bitter and sharp. “Why am I here?” I echoed. “Do you think I wanted this? Do you think I chose to stay tethered to you?”

His brow furrowed, confusion flickering across his face. “I don’t... understand.”

“Of course, you don’t,” I snapped, taking a step closer. “You never did. The bonds, Ciaran. The ones you all pretended didn’t exist—they didn’t break when I died. They chained me to you.”

His face paled, his hands twitching at his sides. “I thought...” His gaze flicked back to the tub, as if searching for answers. “I thought the bond would... go.”

“It didn’t,” I hissed, my voice low and venomous. “You might have killed me, but the bond made sure I stayed. Congratulations.”

He staggered slightly, his face crumpling. “Lily, I?”

“Don’t,” I snarled, the word slicing through the air. “Don’t call me that.”

His brow knit tighter, his confusion deepening. “But... you’re Lily.”

I stepped closer, my presence cold and suffocating. “Lily is dead,” I spat. “You killed her. I’m what’s left.”

His chest rose and fell in uneven gasps, his wide eyes searching mine like I was some puzzle he could solve if he just tried hard enough. Good. Let him try. Let him drown in it.

“I didn’t mean to,” he said, his voice breaking. “You have to believe me. I didn’t want any of this to happen.”

I laughed again, the sound cold and hollow, echoing off the tiled walls. “Didn’t mean to?” I repeated, my head shaking with disbelief. “You stood there. You watched. And when it was over, you left. You could’ve gotten help, but instead, you left me there

like garbage.”

His breath hitched, tears brimming in his eyes. “I know,” he said quickly, his words tumbling over one another. “I know I did. And I’ve been trying?—”

“Trying?” I cut him off, my voice icy. “Trying to do what, Ciaran? Redeem yourself? Do you think this—killing yourself—makes it better? That it balances the scales?”

His shoulders sagged, his gaze falling to the floor. “I couldn’t live with it,” he said softly, his voice trembling. “The guilt... the weight of it. It was too much.”

“Too much,” I repeated, tasting the bitterness of the words. “You have no idea what ‘too much’ even means. You went about your life, playing at grief, while I was stuck here. Watching. Always watching.”

His shoulders sagged, his gaze falling to the floor. “I thought... I thought it would end there,” he said softly, his voice trembling. “That when you were gone, it would all just... stop.”

“Stop?” I repeated, my tone sharpening. “You thought it was that simple? That my death would be the neat little solution to all your problems?”

He winced, his hands twitching at his sides. “I didn’t know what else to think,” he admitted, his voice barely audible. “I couldn’t see a way out. Not for you. Not for me.”

“You didn’t want to see,” I snapped, the lights flickering faintly with the force of my anger. “You stood there. You watched. Then you left me there. You could have gotten help. Instead, you left your fated mate's body there to rot while you pretended you could just move on.”

Ciaran's head snapped up, his eyes wide with anguish, his breath catching as though my words had physically struck him. "I wasn't trying to move on," he rasped, his voice trembling. "I didn't know how to—how to face what I'd done."

"You didn't even try," I said coldly, the bitterness in my tone cutting like a blade. "You ran. Like a coward. Like all of you."

His jaw tightened, his chest rising and falling with uneven breaths. He looked like he wanted to say something, to beg or explain or justify himself, but no words came. Just silence. Heavy and broken.

"You're not free, Ciaran," I said finally, my voice low and venomous. "Not from me. Not from this."

He stared at me, his mouth opening as though to protest, but no sound escaped. His hands clenched at his sides, his entire body trembling as the weight of my words settled over him.

And I didn't wait to see if he'd recover. I turned, fading into the flickering shadows, leaving him drowning in the aftermath of his own failure.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

Sixteen

The bond tugged at me, sharper than usual, pulling me toward Lucian's apartment. A wicked grin curled my lips as I gave in to it, the connection humming with a tantalizing cocktail of guilt and tension. Something had stirred the pot, and I wasn't about to miss the fallout.

Lucian's apartment was already thick with tension by the time I arrived, the bond thrumming faintly as I slipped inside. The room reeked of anger and grief, layered so perfectly I almost didn't need to intervene. Almost.

Lucian paced in sharp, agitated steps, his movements as jagged as the words he threw like daggers. "We were supposed to look out for each other," he snapped, his gaze cutting toward Aeron. "Where the hell were you?"

Kael leaned against the counter, his knuckles white where they gripped the edge. "He was calling out for help," he said, his voice tight. "And you just brushed him off?"

Aeron, sitting stiffly in the corner, shot them both a glare. "You think I don't feel guilty enough?" he hissed. "What about you? What did any of you do? Don't put this all on me."

Perfect. They were already cracking, and I hadn't even done anything yet.

I drifted closer to Aeron first, the bond feeding me just enough energy to fuel my whispers. "You should've answered him," I murmured, low and soft, the words curling into his thoughts like smoke. "You could've saved him. But you didn't."

Aeron flinched, his jaw tightening as he snapped, “He was spiraling for months! I couldn’t babysit him every second.”

Kael’s head shot up, his eyes narrowing. “That’s your excuse?” he spat. “You couldn’t be bothered to give a damn about your best friend?”

Lucian stopped mid-step, his gaze locking onto Aeron like a predator sizing up its prey. “You knew he was struggling,” he said, his voice dangerously low. “And you told him to get over it?”

“I told him not to talk about her,” Aeron shot back, his voice breaking. “Not in the middle of a fucking café, where everyone could hear.”

Kael slammed his fist against the counter, the sound sharp enough to echo. “So, what? You humiliated him instead? That’s better?”

The energy in the room was electric, the weight of their emotions tangling beautifully in the air. I moved toward Kael next, my voice a soft, taunting purr. “ You think Aeron’s the only one who failed him? What about you? What did you do while he fell apart? ”

Kael’s fists clenched, his breath hissing through his teeth. “We all let him down,” he muttered, the guilt twisting his features. “But Aeron?—”

“Don’t,” Aeron snapped, rising from his seat. “Don’t you dare put this all on me. I wasn’t the only one who?—”

Lucian cut him off, his voice sharp enough to slice through the chaos. “Then who, Aeron? Who else is to blame? You’re the one who ignored him.”

Aeron’s fists clenched, his voice rising. “What about you? You’ve been so wrapped

up in your own shit that you didn't even notice him falling apart!"

The argument escalated, their voices crashing into each other in a crescendo of blame and guilt. I let myself bask in it, the bond feeding me their anguish like nectar. It was almost too easy.

But I wanted more.

I turned my focus inward, following the faint thread of Ciaran's bond to where he lingered, aimless and broken in the dorm where he died. It took only a slight tug to bring him to me.

He appeared beside me, flickering like a half-formed shadow, his eyes wide as he took in the scene. "What's happening?" he whispered, his voice trembling.

I smiled, my lips curling with delight. "They're grieving you," I said simply. "It's messy, isn't it?"

Ciaran stepped closer, his gaze darting between his friends. His expression crumbled as he saw the raw pain etched into their features. "They're blaming each other," he said, his voice heavy with disbelief. "They shouldn't?—"

"They should," I interrupted, my tone light and mocking. "Because it's their fault, isn't it? All of them played a part."

"No," Ciaran said quickly, shaking his head. "It wasn't—it wasn't like that."

"Oh, but it was," I cooed, drifting toward Lucian. I leaned close, my breath brushing against his ear as I whispered, "It's all falling apart, Lucian. And you can't fix it."

Lucian froze mid-step, his jaw tightening as the thought took root. "This is pointless,"

he muttered, his voice low and clipped. “Arguing won’t bring him back.”

Kael rounded on him, his frustration boiling over. “So what, we just forget about it? Pretend it didn’t happen?”

Ciaran’s hands reached for Kael, his form flickering as his fingers passed through him. “Kael, stop,” he pleaded. “This isn’t what I wanted.”

I watched him struggle, his desperation growing with every failed attempt to be heard. My grin widened as I leaned toward Aeron, my voice a soft murmur. “ He hates you most, you know. You were his last hope, and you failed him. ”

Aeron flinched, his expression twisting as he shoved past Kael. “I can’t do this,” he snapped, heading for the door.

Ciaran turned to me, his stormy eyes wide with horror. “You’re doing this,” he said, his voice trembling. “You’re tearing them apart.”

I laughed, the sound sharp and delighted. “Sucks, doesn’t it?” I said, my voice dripping with satisfaction. “Watching and not being able to do anything. You’re just like me now.”

Seventeen

The cold metal of the dumbbell felt good against my palm, grounding me in the way nothing else could. The rhythmic sound of weights clinking, the sharp tang of sweat and iron—it was the closest I got to peace these days. But even here, the bond hummed faintly, like a whisper in the back of my mind I couldn't shake.

Ciaran's face kept flashing behind my eyelids. The hollow look in his eyes the last time I saw him. The way he slumped in his seat that day, his voice quieter than usual when he tried to talk about her.

You told him to stop. You shut him down.

I gritted my teeth and lifted the dumbbell higher, ignoring the tightening in my chest. He was talking about Lily, like we hadn't all silently agreed to bury that along with her body. I'd thought shutting him down was the right call at the time—protecting him from the spiral I'd been teetering on myself.

And now he's gone.

The weight dropped to the ground with a thud, the sound echoing across the empty gym. My breathing was ragged, my chest heaving as I glared at the mirrored wall in front of me. My reflection stared back, disheveled and drenched in sweat, but all I could see was failure. I should've done more. Said more. Listened.

The air felt heavier than usual, pressing against my skin as I grabbed a towel and wiped my face. My phone buzzed on the bench nearby, the notification lighting up

the screen. A group message. Lucian's name at the top.

I didn't even read it. I couldn't. The thought of their voices, of hearing Kael's snide remarks or Lucian's arrogant attempts to keep us "together," made my stomach churn. They don't care about Ciaran—not really. Not like I do.

I shoved the phone into my bag and slung it over my shoulder, the gym suddenly suffocating. The cold night air hit me like a slap as I stepped outside, the quiet campus streets stretching before me. I walked with no destination in mind, letting the bond's muted hum pull me aimlessly.

Every shadow felt like it was watching me. Every creak of the wind sounded like a voice. My thoughts raced, chaotic and unrelenting.

He reached out. You ignored him.

I clenched my fists, my nails biting into my palms. The weight of guilt churned in my stomach, twisting tighter with every step. Why didn't I help? Why didn't I do more?

The campus was empty this time of night, the buildings dark except for the occasional hallway light spilling through high windows. I avoided the main paths, sticking to the side alleys and narrow walkways that felt less exposed. The darkness wrapped around me like a second skin, heavy and stifling.

A flicker of movement at the edge of my vision made me stop. I turned sharply, my eyes scanning the empty space behind me, but there was nothing. Just the faint rustle of branches in the breeze and the muted hum of a nearby streetlamp. My pulse quickened as I stood there, frozen, half-expecting something to step out of the shadows.

Paranoid now?

I forced my feet to move, my pace quickening as I headed toward the library. Its warm lights were a beacon in the cold, and I pushed through the glass doors without hesitation, the faint scent of old books and worn carpet enveloping me. My footsteps echoed softly as I made my way through the aisles, weaving between towering shelves until I found a secluded corner.

My hand traced the spines of the books absently, the textures grounding me as I tried to force my thoughts into submission. But the quiet wasn't soothing—it was oppressive. It pressed against my ears, amplifying the hum of the bond until it felt like it was crawling beneath my skin.

You should've died instead of him.

The thought hit me hard, sharp and cutting. My breath hitched, my chest tightening. It's true, though, isn't it? He was better than me. Kinder. I just let him drown in this mess while I stood there, too afraid to help.

A book toppled off the shelf and landed at my feet, the sound making me flinch. I stared at it, my stomach churning as I bent to pick it up. The title was faded, the leather cover worn, but the sight of it made my chest constrict. Trauma and Guilt: Unraveling the Psyche.

I tossed it onto the nearest table, my hands trembling as I sank into the chair. The spiral deepened, my thoughts quick and relentless.

You didn't help him because you didn't care enough.

You ignored him because you were too much of a coward to face it.

You'll fail the rest of them too. You're already failing.

The hum of the bond grew louder, more insistent, like it was pressing against the walls of my skull. My fingers curled into fists against my temples, nails biting into my skin. “Shut up,” I hissed through clenched teeth. “Just shut the fuck up.”

The room felt smaller somehow, the shelves looming over me, the faint flicker of the overhead lights casting jagged shadows on the floor. I shoved myself to my feet, pacing the narrow aisle as the weight in my chest grew heavier.

My mind drifted back to Ciaran, his voice—small and broken—when he asked if I thought she would’ve wanted him to move on even before we met up in the cafe. The way his eyes searched mine for reassurance I didn’t have the strength to give.

You failed him then, and you’ll fail them all in the end.

I froze mid-step, my hands gripping the edge of the nearest shelf to steady myself. The words felt like an inevitability, not a fleeting thought. My breathing was shallow, my heart pounding as the shadows seemed to thicken around me.

Another book fell from the shelf, the sudden noise making me jump. I didn’t pick this one up. I couldn’t. The air felt charged, static crawling over my skin as if the entire library was holding its breath.

The lights flickered once, twice, before plunging me into darkness.

Eighteen

I jolted awake, gasping for breath, my chest tight as if something heavy had been pressing down on it. The sheets clung to me, damp and twisted around my legs, while the air in the room felt thick and suffocating. My hands shook as I pushed them through my hair, trying to chase away the fragments of the nightmare, but the images stuck, sharp and unrelenting.

Lily's face hovered in my mind, pale and hollow, her lifeless eyes fixed on me. They weren't hers—not the warm, hazel ones I remembered. They were bloodshot, unblinking, staring through me like I was nothing. Her mouth moved, forming shapes that didn't make sense, silent accusations spilling from her lips. And then she screamed—a soundless wail that rattled my chest and scraped through my skull.

I rubbed my face, trying to ground myself. It was just a dream, I told myself. But my heart hammered like I'd been running for my life, and no amount of steady breathing could slow it. The darkness of the room closed in around me, and I fumbled for the bedside lamp. The sudden flood of light stung my eyes, but it wasn't enough to banish the image of her face.

Swinging my legs over the side of the bed, I planted my feet on the cool floor, hoping the sensation would help. It didn't. I sat there for a long moment, head in my hands, replaying the dream in agonizing detail. It had been months since I last dreamed of her. The sharpness of it, the way it felt so real, left my skin crawling.

The thought clawed its way in before I could stop it. Because you failed her. You'll always fail her.

The shower didn't help either. The scalding water hit my skin, but the chill wouldn't leave. No matter how much I scrubbed, I couldn't shake the feeling of her stare burning into me.

By the time I made it to the kitchen, I was a mess of raw nerves, my muscles aching from the tension I couldn't release. My phone buzzed on the counter just as I poured my first cup of coffee. The subject line glared up at me from the screen: Memorial for Ciaran and Lily.

I hesitated, staring at it like opening the email would make everything worse. Finally, I swiped it open.

To honor the life and legacy of Ciaran... and to acknowledge Lily's tragic passing.

My stomach churned. Legacy. The word lodged in my throat, bitter and wrong. Of course, they focused on Ciaran. He was the golden boy, the one who mattered. Lily? She was just an afterthought, a casualty no one wanted to dwell on.

I set the coffee mug down harder than I intended, the clang echoing in the quiet kitchen. The bitterness that had been simmering all morning bubbled over. They'll forget her. Just like you let her fade.

I gritted my teeth, trying to swallow the thought, but it twisted in my chest, relentless. She deserved better. She deserved more. And I had done nothing.

The dining hall wasn't any better. Kael and Aeron were already at the table, their body language stiff, their silence sharp enough to cut through the dull hum of conversation around us. The air between them crackled with unspoken tension, and I knew it was only a matter of time before it exploded.

"You gonna glare at your eggs all morning?" Kael muttered, stabbing at his plate

with his fork.

Aeron didn't look up, his tone clipped. "Better than whatever you're doing. Is that supposed to be eating?"

"At least I'm not sulking like a martyr," Kael shot back, his voice laced with venom.

Aeron's head snapped up, his jaw tight. "Say that again."

I slammed my coffee mug down, the sound cutting through their argument like a whip. "Enough," I snapped, my voice harsher than I meant. Both of them turned toward me, Kael with his trademark smirk, Aeron with his glare.

"This isn't helping," I added, rubbing at the ache spreading behind my eyes.

Kael leaned back in his chair, arms crossed. "Right. Because ignoring everything is really working for us."

"I said enough," I barked, my patience hanging by a thread. "You can kill each other later. For now, just shut up."

Kael muttered something under his breath, but he didn't push further. Aeron dropped his gaze back to his plate, his shoulders tense. The silence that followed wasn't any better. It was brittle, oppressive, and only made the weight in my chest grow heavier.

I stayed behind after they both left, staring down at my half-empty coffee cup. The dining hall felt quieter without them, but it didn't feel calmer. My thoughts spiraled, circling back to the email, the dream, the nagging feeling that I was missing something important.

You failed them both.

The words sank their teeth into me again, sharp and unforgiving. You didn't help her. You didn't save him. You let them die.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, willing the thoughts to stop, but they only grew louder. No matter how many times I told myself I'd made the right choices, the doubts didn't go away.

The scrape of my chair against the floor pulled me from my thoughts. As I stood, I caught sight of my arm, the skin marked with jagged, red scratches. I froze, staring at them. They weren't faint, weren't shallow. They were deliberate.

When the hell did this happen?

I ran a finger over the marks, the sting sharp and raw. My pulse quickened as I tried to piece it together. Nothing. No memory, no explanation. Just the scratches, a physical reminder of the chaos swirling inside me.

I flexed my fingers, the ache in my arm dull but present as I left the dining hall. The scratches lingered at the edge of my thoughts, sharp and accusing, as if they were trying to tell me something. I just didn't know what.

And that was the part that scared me the most.

Nineteen

The coin spun between my fingers, the polished edge glinting in the soft light of the dorm. It landed with a sharp clink in my palm before I flipped it again. Heads. Tails. Heads. The rhythm wasn't grounding me the way it usually did. My thoughts were too loud, each one spiraling into the next.

I glanced at the suit laid out on my bed—a tailored black jacket, crisp white shirt, silk tie. Perfectly pressed. Impeccably appropriate. It felt ridiculous. Like I was playing dress-up for an event I wanted no part of.

Why are you even going? The question gnawed at me as I slipped the jacket on, tying the tie with practiced ease. Not for Lily, apparently. Not for someone who barely warranted a mention in the official statement. An unfortunate accident, they'd called it. She fell, struck her head, and didn't survive.

Bullshit.

The mirror reflected a version of me I didn't recognize. The flawless mask of control, polished and smooth, hiding the cracks that spiderwebbed beneath the surface. I flipped the coin again and shoved it into my pocket. Time to go.

The auditorium was packed. Rows of polished wood seats stretched to the back wall, filled with faces I barely registered. Most of them were students I didn't know, some professors, a smattering of administrators who looked appropriately solemn. I slid into a chair near the back, keeping my head down.

The dean stepped to the podium, his voice steady and rehearsed. “Today, we come together to remember two members of our community—Ciaran Ashford and Lilith Voss...”

I tuned out after their names. My fingers wrapped around the coin in my pocket, the edge digging into my palm. When I glanced up again, the dean was talking about Ciaran’s academic achievements, his leadership, his promising future.

“He was a bright light among us,” the dean said, his tone thick with emotion. “A friend, a confidant, and a role model...”

The words blurred as I stared at the stage. Ciaran had been more than that. He wasn’t just bright. He was the kind of person who made you feel like you belonged, even when you didn’t. The glue that held us together. The one who listened. The one who made things better. And now he was gone. Not because he wasn’t loved. Not because he wasn’t wanted.

Because we didn’t see how much he was hurting.

My chest ached, the coin biting into my skin as I gripped it tighter. He reached out, and we ignored him. We failed him.

Applause broke me out of the spiral, and I realized the dean had stepped aside. A professor stepped up to the podium after the dean, their expression appropriately solemn. “We also remember Lilith,” they began, their voice soft but impersonal. “Her passing is a tragedy that reminds us of the fragility of life and the importance of community.”

That was it. No anecdotes, no personal touch—just generic platitudes that felt hollow. My chest tightened as I stared at the stage, my fingers curling around the coin in my pocket. Fragility of life? That was all they could say about her?

The professor moved on quickly, returning to the topic of loss and healing, but the words barely registered. They didn't know her. None of them did. Lily wasn't fragile. She wasn't some poetic reminder of mortality. She was fire—sharp edges and passion, someone who burned too brightly to be ignored. But now, even in death, she was being overshadowed. Dismissed. Forgotten.

My jaw tightened, the polished mask I wore slipping as anger bubbled up beneath it. None of this was for her. None of this was for them. It was for everyone else. So they could feel good about their hollow gestures of grief. So they could pretend they cared.

I stared at the stage, my vision blurring. The coin in my pocket felt heavier, digging deeper into my skin. My leg bounced as I tried to hold myself together, but it was slipping. Everything was slipping.

After the ceremony, the group lingered near the doors, the tension between us suffocating. I leaned against the wall, arms crossed, trying to keep my face neutral. Lucian cleared his throat, stepping forward like he was about to deliver one of his speeches.

"I know this has been hard," he began, his tone calm but authoritative. "But we need to?—"

"Don't," I cut in, my voice sharper than I intended. The others turned to look at me, but I didn't care. "Don't act like you've got all the answers, Lucian."

He frowned, his calm demeanor cracking. "I'm not trying to?—"

"Yes, you are," I said, stepping closer. "You've been trying to control everything since this started. Acting like you're the glue holding us together."

"I'm trying to keep us from falling apart," he shot back, his voice rising.

“And how’s that working out for you?” My laugh was bitter, cutting. “Ciaran’s dead. Lily’s gone. We’re barely holding on, and you still think you can fix this?”

Lucian’s jaw tightened, his hands curling into fists. “What do you want me to do, Kael? Just give up?”

“Maybe,” I snapped. “Because everything you’ve done has made it worse.”

The silence that followed was deafening. Lucian stared at me, his expression a mix of anger and something else—something I couldn’t name. I didn’t give him the chance to respond. I turned on my heel and shoved my way through the crowd outside, the cold air biting against my skin.

The dorm was quiet when I got back. I slammed the door shut, the sound reverberating through the room. My chest heaved as I stood there, staring at the darkened space. My hands trembled, and the familiar weight of the coin in my pocket wasn’t enough to steady them.

I collapsed onto the bed, letting out a shaky breath. My shirt felt tight, sticking to my side. I tugged it up, my fingers brushing against raw skin. I froze.

Scratches. Jagged and deep, the marks ran along my ribs, fresh and red. The edges burned, the pain sharp and unrelenting.

When the hell did this happen?

I traced the lines, my mind racing. No fight. No fall. Nothing that explained the wounds now etched into my skin. They shouldn’t be there. But they were.

And I couldn’t shake the feeling that they meant something.

Twenty

Walking into the diner felt like stepping into a time capsule that had given up on keeping itself preserved. The coffee smelled burnt, the fryer oil had probably been in use since before I was born, and the ceiling fan wheezed with every slow rotation. The booths sagged like they'd lost the will to support anyone, and the counter stools swiveled with a faint creak, like they wanted to protest their existence. A waitress tossed a half-hearted "hon" in my direction as she passed, more out of muscle memory than care. Normally, I'd tear a place like this apart just for the fun of it, but today, I couldn't summon the energy.

The others were already seated in a corner booth, their faces lit by the dim glow of the overhead light. Aeron sat with his arms crossed, his expression as tight as ever. Lucian was nursing a cup of coffee, his shoulders rigid, while Thorne stared out the window like he wanted to be anywhere else.

I slid into the open seat next to Lucian, the leather squeaking under my weight. "So, this is what normal looks like," I muttered, pulling out the coin from my pocket and flipping it absently. The edge pressed into my palm as it spun through the air. Heads. Of course.

"Figured we could all use a distraction," Lucian said, his tone clipped. He didn't look at me.

"Right," I drawled. "Because pretending everything's fine has worked so well for us so far."

No one laughed. The silence that followed wasn't just awkward—it was suffocating. I pocketed the coin and grabbed a menu, even though I wasn't hungry. The laminated plastic stuck to my fingers as I skimmed the options. Pancakes. Burgers. A sad-looking "house salad" that probably hadn't seen a fresh ingredient in years.

The waitress appeared, chewing gum with the kind of apathy you could only earn after years of dealing with people like us. "What'll it be?"

"Coffee," I said without looking up. The others mumbled their orders, and she shuffled off, her sneakers squeaking against the floor.

For a few minutes, we managed to avoid talking about anything real. Aeron commented on the weather. Thorne made some half-hearted remark about his classes. It was stilted, unnatural, like we were actors in a bad play, reciting lines we didn't believe.

Finally, I decided to break the tension. "You know," I said, leaning back in my seat, "if this whole 'acting normal' thing doesn't pan out, we could always try group therapy. I hear they give you free snacks."

Aeron shot me a look that could've curdled milk. "You think this is funny?"

"Not particularly," I said, my tone flat. "But I figured someone should try to lighten the mood before we all spontaneously combust."

"Well, maybe you should try shutting up for once," Aeron snapped, his voice low but sharp. "Not everything needs your commentary."

I sat forward, my elbows resting on the sticky table. "Right. Because what this group really needs is more brooding silence."

The tension spiked, the air between us crackling like a live wire. Aeron's jaw tightened, his hands curling into fists on the table. Before he could respond, Lucian held up a hand.

"Enough," he said, his voice calm but firm. "We didn't come here to fight."

"No, we came here to pretend," Thorne muttered, finally looking away from the window. His gaze locked on Lucian, cold and unflinching. "That's what you want, right? Just keep playing leader and hope no one notices the cracks."

Lucian's composure faltered, just for a moment, but it was enough. "I'm trying to hold us together," he said, his tone harder now. "Someone has to."

"Maybe you're not the right someone," Thorne said.

The table went quiet, the weight of the accusation settling over all of us. I stared at the chipped edge of my coffee cup, my pulse pounding in my ears. The bond thrummed faintly in the back of my mind, a reminder of everything we'd lost. Lily wasn't here, but she was everywhere—an absence that felt more present than any of us could bear.

"Are we really doing this?" I asked, my voice louder than I intended. "Ciaran's dead, Lily's gone, and this is what we've got left? Petty arguments and passive-aggressive bullshit?"

Aeron turned to me, his eyes blazing. "Don't talk about him like that. You don't get to."

"Don't I?" I shot back, the words spilling out before I could stop them. "At least I'm not drowning in self-pity."

His fist slammed against the table, the sound echoing through the diner. The waitress glanced over, but when she saw the look on Aeron's face, she wisely stayed away.

Lucian stepped in again, his voice strained. "Kael, stop. Aeron, sit down."

I hadn't even realized Aeron had stood. He stared me down for a long moment before sinking back into his seat, his movements stiff with barely restrained anger.

"This is fucking dumb," Thorne muttered, shaking his head.

The rest of the meal passed in strained silence. The coffee was bitter, the kind that tasted like it had been sitting on the burner for hours. I barely touched it, my appetite long gone. When the check came, Lucian paid without asking, pulling a black card from his wallet like it cost him nothing. It probably did.

I grabbed the to-go cup the waitress handed me and walked out without a word. The cold air hit me hard as I stepped outside, but it didn't do much to clear the tension coiled in my chest. I made it to the trash can near the curb and tossed the coffee in, the cup hitting the bottom with more force than necessary.

"This isn't working anymore," I muttered, the words hanging in the frosty air.

I shoved my hands into my pockets and kept walking, the cracks in our group trailing behind me like shadows I couldn't outrun.

Twenty-One

The air in Lucian's apartment was thick with the warmth of sleep and the faint musk of bodies intertwined. Shadows stretched across the walls, their edges softened by the dim glow of moonlight slipping through the curtains. I didn't drift in so much as claim the space, the flicker of my form rippling like a breeze through still water. My gaze locked on him immediately—his form sprawled across the bed, vulnerable and infuriatingly perfect, his chest rising and falling in an easy rhythm that mocked the storm churning inside me.

My focus shifted, and the sight of her curled beside him sent a sharp pang through me. She lay pressed against his side, her dark hair fanned out across the pillow, her bare skin glowing softly in the dim light. My jealousy flared, hot and visceral. "She doesn't deserve this," I whispered, the words barely audible even to myself. "She doesn't deserve you."

I drifted closer, the bond between us pulsing faintly, pulling me toward him. It was weak, fractured by death but still there, a thread tying me to him in ways he couldn't begin to understand. My fingers ghosted over his chest, tracing the faint rise and fall of his breaths. The touch was insubstantial, my translucent hand passing through his skin, but the act was enough to feed the possessiveness twisting inside me.

"You always were mine," I murmured, leaning down until my lips hovered just above his ear. The words spilled from me like a confession, equal parts longing and anger. My jealousy warped into something darker as I traced his chest, my touch lingering lower, skimming over the hard lines of his abdomen. The flicker of power from the bond fed me, made me bolder, more substantial, as though his energy was willingly

surrendering to me.

I slid my hand lower, watching his body for signs of reaction. The faintest twitch of his lips sent a thrill racing through me. My grin widened as I leaned closer, my whispers taunting now. “Do you feel me, Lucian? Even in your dreams, you know I’m here. You’ll never escape me.”

As I continued, his breathing hitched, his body stirring beneath my touch. My fingers trailed further, brushing over him, feeling the warmth radiating from his skin. The tension in his muscles shifted, and a low groan escaped him. Satisfaction bloomed in my chest as I watched him harden beneath my hand, his body betraying him even in sleep.

I couldn’t help the wicked smile that curled my lips as I felt Lucian grow hard under my touch. The power surging through me from our bond was intoxicating, and it sparked an idea so deliciously naughty I could barely contain myself. My black dress, the same one I’d worn on the night of my death, was a whisper against my skin as I gathered it up over my hips. With a slow, deliberate motion, I hooked my fingers into the sides of my panties and pulled them aside, baring myself to the cool air of the room—and to him.

Using the energy that pulsed between us, I focused on becoming more solid, feeling the familiar slide of becoming tangible, at least to him. I positioned myself over him, my heart pounding in my chest as I lowered myself onto his cock. The sensation was strange, a mix of ethereal and corporeal, as I started to ride him, slow and measured.

His face was a mask of pleasure in the dim light, and every so often, I’d glance at his girlfriend lying beside him. Each time I looked at her, a surge of possessiveness would shoot through me, and I’d find myself riding Lucian harder, grinding down onto him with increasing fervor.

As Lucian's moans and groans grew louder, I leaned forward, pressing my hand over his mouth to muffle the sounds. The last thing I wanted was to wake up his girlfriend—or Lucian himself. I watched him closely, my own pleasure building with every movement, every twitch of his body beneath mine.

I couldn't help but stare as I rode him, my transparent form allowing me to see him inside me, his cock twitching and throbbing in the air yet intimately connected with me. It was a surreal sight, and it pushed me closer to the edge.

When I came, it was with a shuddering intensity that rocked through my entire being. I felt Lucian follow moments later, his body tensing beneath mine as he emptied himself into me. I watched, transfixed, as his release painted my insides white making me look less see through and more real, an erotic spectacle I could never have imagined in life.

I stayed there, perched on top of him, whispering all the things I'd always wanted to say into his ear. Sweet nothings mingled with dark promises, a blend that made his body twitch in response. And before I finally withdrew from him, leaving him spent and sated in his sleep, I made sure to leave a mark—a hickey, high on his neck where the world would see it. It was a claim, a signature on my work.

As the night waned, I continued to whisper to him, my voice a soft murmur in the quiet room. I told him secrets and dreams, confessions of love and hate, until the first light of dawn crept through the curtains. And when I finally slipped away, leaving Lucian to wake with the evidence of our night together, I felt a sense of satisfaction I hadn't known since before my death.

The first light of dawn seeped through the curtains as I straightened, my gaze lingering on him one last time. He looked peaceful, as though the night hadn't happened. My attention shifted to her—still curled up beside him, her lips parted slightly in sleep, her hair a tangled halo on the pillow. The jealousy burned hotter

now, clawing its way up my chest. She didn't deserve him. She never did.

I drifted to her side of the bed, the faint hum of the bond still thrumming through me. Her phone sat on the nightstand, the screen dark but tantalizing. I reached for it, my translucent fingers brushing the cold glass as it lit up. Locked. No problem.

I leaned closer, angling the phone toward her face. The screen unlocked instantly, revealing a message thread I'd already seen. Two message threads, actually. I'd caught her texting them before—two different men she was cheating on Lucian with, her thumbs flying across the screen while Lucian sat barely a foot away. I'd wanted to snap the phone in half then and there, but this moment was so much sweeter.

I scrolled through the messages, my grin widening with every swipe. Explicit photos, promises of secret rendezvous, and words so vile they stung even me. Weak. Clingy. He's just a fallback.

I glanced at her, still obviously curled against Lucian, and felt the last thread of my restraint snap. "You thought you were so clever," I murmured, my voice a ghostly whisper. "But you don't know the first thing about consequences."

With a flick of my finger, I selected every incriminating message, every photo, and every word. My finger hovered over the contacts list for a moment, savoring the anticipation. Two men? Let's see how many others need to know who you really are. I tapped Select All, watching the names populate the recipient list.

Before I hit Send, I navigated to her settings, my touch precise. A quick tap set her phone to Do Not Disturb, ensuring no sound, no vibrations, no lights would betray the chaos I was about to unleash. "Wouldn't want you waking up too soon," I said with a smirk.

Then, I hit Send. The screen confirmed the message had gone through, and within

seconds, the phone began to fill with notifications—silent, unseen, but relentless. I set it back on the nightstand, its dark screen as oblivious as its owner.

I leaned down, my lips hovering close to her ear. “You’ll never have all of him,” I hissed, my tone dripping with venom. She stirred slightly, her brow furrowing, but she didn’t wake.

Straightening, I turned back toward Lucian, my gaze softening for just a moment. He looked so at peace, so unbothered by the chaos he’d wake to. The mark on his neck—a dark, unmistakable bruise—stood out starkly against his skin. My mark. My claim.

As I slipped out of the apartment, the sky turning a pale lavender with the coming dawn, I felt a smug satisfaction settle over me. She would learn what it felt like to lose him. To lose everything.

Twenty-Two

The first thing I noticed when I woke up was how warm and comfortable I felt. The sheets were soft against my skin, the faint scent of Emma's shampoo still on the pillow beside me. For the first time in weeks, the weight on my chest didn't feel quite as heavy. The nightmares hadn't come, and my body still thrummed with the kind of satisfaction only she could give me.

I rolled onto my side, my gaze landing on her sleeping form. She looked peaceful, her lashes fanned out against her cheeks, her lips slightly parted. She was beautiful. Perfect. Despite everything—Ciaran, Lily, the tension pulling my life apart—she'd been my anchor. My calm in the storm.

I reached out, brushing a strand of hair from her face. She didn't stir, and a small smile tugged at the corners of my mouth. For a moment, everything felt normal. Like we could pretend the last few months hadn't happened.

Reluctantly, I slipped out of bed, grabbing my phone from the nightstand as I headed to the bathroom. The cool tiles sent a jolt through my bare feet, waking me up fully. I locked the door behind me and leaned against the counter, the familiar glow of my phone screen illuminating the space as I opened my messages.

It was the usual flood of notifications—texts from classmates, business inquiries, and people trying to get close to me for my name or my money. I swiped through them absently, my thumb pausing on one from a number I didn't recognize.

“Lucian, are you okay? This must be so hard for you. If you need anything, let me

know.”

Another message followed: “You deserve better. Let me prove it to you. ;)”

My brows furrowed. The texts kept coming, some subtle, others shameless. All of them hinted at something I couldn’t quite piece together. Then I saw it: Emma’s name pinned to the top of a group chat. The preview alone made my stomach lurch: “You all need to see this ? —”

I opened it.

The first photo was of me, shirtless in bed, my face half-turned toward the camera. A photo she must have taken while I was asleep. The caption burned into my eyes: “This is the idiot I’ve been putting up with.”

I scrolled, each message cutting deeper than the last. “I can’t believe he still trusts me. Men are so gullible.” “Honestly, he’s pathetic. So clingy. I’m only staying with him for the perks.” “Can’t wait to see you later, babe. He has no idea.”

And then there were the photos—explicit ones—sent to two different men. My jaw tightened as I stared at her words, her body on display for people who weren’t me. People she’d chosen over me.

A thought flashed through my mind, unbidden: She sent this herself. My grip on the phone loosened slightly as I considered it. She had shown me the screenshots. Was she hacked? Maybe. But even if she hadn’t hit send, the texts still existed. The photos were real. The lies weren’t any less true just because they’d come to light this way.

My chest tightened as something clicked—a comment she’d made weeks ago. “It’s just a work thing. I’ll grab dinner with you next time, okay?” That same day, I’d found her makeup wiped clean, her hair damp like she’d rushed home to cover

something up. And now, in the messages, there it was: “Can’t meet tonight, babe. Covering my tracks. ”

The room felt smaller, suffocating. My anger swelled as I scrolled through the messages again, my knuckles white around the phone. She’d lied about everything. Used me. Laughed behind my back while I trusted her blindly. The betrayal stung like a fresh wound, each text a new cut.

I unlocked the bathroom door, my footsteps heavy as I strode back into the bedroom. She was still there, curled up sweetly in bed like she hadn’t just detonated my life. My blood boiled as I stopped at the edge of the bed.

“Wake up.”

She stirred, groaning softly before her eyes fluttered open. When she saw my face, her brows knit together in confusion. “Lucian? What’s wrong?”

I held up the phone, the group chat glowing on the screen. “Care to explain this?”

Her confusion deepened, her sleepy expression melting into shock as she sat up, clutching the sheet to her chest. “What? I don’t—what is that?”

“You tell me,” I said, my voice rising. “It came from your number! You’re the one who outed yourself to everyone. Did you forget to unselect my number? Or did you just think I would be too stupid to notice?”

Her face paled as she stared at the phone. “This... this isn’t real. Someone must’ve hacked my phone! Why would I send that? Why would I put myself in this position?” Her voice climbed higher, tinged with desperation.

I knew what I said didn’t make sense after I said them, but they didn’t undo the truth

in front of me. “Maybe you didn’t send it. Maybe someone did hack you. But it doesn’t change what’s in here. The texts, the pictures—they happened. You lied to me.”

She stammered, her face crumbling as she reached for the phone. “Lucian, please! You have to believe me—this isn’t me! Someone’s trying to destroy us?—”

“ You destroyed us!” I snapped. “You lied about everything. You used me. Mocked me. How long, Emma? How long have you been making me look like an idiot?”

Her panic turned to anger. “You don’t know what you’re talking about! This isn’t me! You’re blaming me for?—”

Her words cut off as I turned away, trying to breathe through the fury. My head was spinning, my vision blurring at the edges. I took a step toward the door, desperate for air.

“Don’t walk away from me!” she shouted, grabbing my arm.

I spun back toward her, the force of my movement unbalancing both of us. She stumbled, her grip slipping, but before I could catch myself, something shoved me hard from the front—a sharp, invisible force that sent me careening backward. My foot caught on the edge of the bedframe. Time slowed as I fell, my head slamming into the sharp corner of the dresser.

Pain exploded through my skull, blinding and all-encompassing. The room spun violently, the edges of my vision darkening as Emma’s scream echoed in my ears.

“Lucian? Lucian!” Her voice was frantic, trembling, but it sounded so far away. I tried to reach for her, to speak, but the darkness swallowed me whole before I could.

Twenty-Three

Laughter filled the room, sharp and unhinged, echoing off the walls like the cackling of something utterly untethered.

The sound sliced through the fog in my mind, pulling me out of the strange, weightless haze that had enveloped me. My vision sharpened slowly, and the first thing I saw was Emma. She was kneeling by my body— my body —her hands pressed to my chest as she sobbed uncontrollably.

“Lucian! Lucian, please! Oh my God, no!”

I tried to move, to speak, but nothing happened. My body didn’t respond, as though it was no longer mine. That was when I saw it. Me. I was sprawled on the floor, my head tilted at an unnatural angle, blood pooling beneath me like a dark halo. Emma’s tears smeared streaks of red across her hands as she fumbled for her phone, her fingers trembling too much to unlock it.

“What the fuck?” I whispered, my voice hollow and shaky. The sight didn’t make sense, couldn’t make sense. “That... that’s not me.”

“It’s you, darling,” a voice purred, rich with amusement. The laughter subsided into a low, gleeful chuckle. Slowly, I turned toward its source, and my heart stuttered.

There she was, standing at the edge of the room. My breath caught, my stomach twisting. Lily. She was standing there, clear as day, her expression one of almost childlike delight as laughter continued to ripple from her. Her dark dress shimmered

faintly in the dim light, her hair falling in soft waves around her face, just as I remembered.

“Lily?” The name came out as a hoarse whisper, my voice cracking. It was impossible. She was dead. But there she was.

Her eyes flicked to mine, the gleam in them brighter now, almost feverish. For a fleeting moment, I let myself believe it was really her—the girl we’d lost, the one I’d never stopped feeling guilty for. The Lily I’d loved in my own quiet way. But as I stared, the illusion began to fracture. There was something wrong, something jagged and cruel about her smile.

But that wasn't the only issue. I was dead. Gone. My life, my plans, everything ... wiped out in one violent instant. But even through that storm, I couldn't tear my eyes from her, trying to reconcile the Lily I knew with what I was seeing now.

Before I could fully process it, another voice ripped through the air, raw and trembling with rage.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?!”

I turned just as Ciaran stormed toward her, his face contorted in fury. His eyes blazed, not just with anger, but with something deeper, something so twisted and raw it made my chest tighten.

“This is what you wanted? You’ve dragged me into your mess for months, but this...” He gestured wildly toward my body, then toward Emma, who was now screaming into her phone, begging for an ambulance. “This is too far, Lilith! Too fucking far!”

The name hit me like a slap. My heart lurched as the truth unraveled before me. She wasn't Lily. Not anymore. The girl we’d loved, the girl we’d mourned—she was

gone. What stood before us now was something else entirely, something dark and cruel, her laughter cutting through the air like a weapon.

Lilith blinked at him, her expression a masterful combination of mock innocence and boredom. “Too far? Oh, spare me, Ciaran. You’ve been dead longer than he has. Shouldn’t you be used to it by now?”

His hands clenched into fists, trembling at his sides. “It wasn’t supposed to be like this! None of it! You—” His voice cracked, and suddenly, all the rage drained out of him, leaving something raw and broken in its place. “You ruined everything,” he whispered, his voice barely audible now. “Everything I cared about, everything I was ... you ruined it all.”

For a moment, it was quiet—but it wasn’t peace. It was the silence of a storm poised to rip itself apart. Ciaran’s gaze lingered on her, and something in his eyes shifted, like a fractured pane of glass catching the light. Beneath the fury, beneath the despair, there was an aching tenderness. He hated her. He needed her. And she had destroyed him.

And then he broke. Sobs racked his body as he crumpled to the ground, his hands burying his face as he cried openly. It wasn’t a quiet kind of grief. It was ugly and unrestrained, the kind of sobbing that came from someone who’d lost everything—even the hope of hating her properly.

For a moment, I couldn’t do anything but stare. Lilith, however, was anything but frozen. Her laughter bubbled up again, louder, sharper, more unhinged. She threw her head back, her entire form flickering faintly as she howled with glee.

“Oh, my dear Ciaran,” she wheezed between gasps of laughter. “You are a delight ! Ruined everything? Oh, sweetheart, you overestimate how much I cared about your precious little life. You think this is about you ? It’s always been bigger than you.

Bigger than him.” She gestured toward my body on the floor, her laughter rising again. “But watching you both fall apart is the cherry on top. Truly.”

I’d never felt hatred like the kind that boiled in me now. It wasn’t just for her—it was for myself. For being blind. For letting things spiral to this point. For not seeing how deeply this darkness had woven itself into all of our lives.

“Stop.” My voice was quiet, but it cut through the chaos like a blade. Lilith turned toward me, her laughter trailing off, though the smirk remained firmly in place.

“Stop?” she echoed, tilting her head. “Oh, Lucian, darling. We’re just getting started.”

Ciaran’s sobs slowed, his red-rimmed eyes lifting to meet mine. There was something there—something I hadn’t seen in him since before Lily... before everything.

Regret.

“I tried to stop her,” he rasped, his voice raw. “I tried, but...” He trailed off, shaking his head. “She always wins. You can’t fight her.”

“Can’t fight me?” Lilith purred, taking a step forward. Her form flickered, growing darker, more substantial. The temperature in the room plummeted. “Oh, darling, you couldn’t fight me if you wanted to. And now?” Her gaze shifted back to me, predatory and gleeful. “Now, you’re mine.”

Emma’s frantic cries echoed faintly behind us, her desperation filling the space where my heartbeat used to be. I turned to look at her, at the tears streaming down her face, at the way she clung to the phone like it could somehow fix this.

And for the first time since waking up, I felt something new. Something sharp and

unfamiliar.

Hope.

Because as much as Lilith thought she'd won, I could feel the bond now. Between her, me, and Ciaran. It wasn't as strong as it had been in life, but it was there, pulsing faintly like an ember waiting to ignite.

"We'll see about that," I said, meeting Lilith's gaze head-on.

Her smirk faltered for the briefest moment before the laughter returned, louder and colder than ever. But I didn't flinch. Not this time.

Twenty-Four

The funeral was held on a dreary, overcast afternoon, as though the world itself had dimmed to mourn. The chapel was suffused with a dull gray light, the stained-glass windows filtering muted hues of blue and red onto the polished wooden pews. The air was heavy, thick with the scent of lilies and the murmured whispers of those who had gathered to pay their respects—or, in some cases, to gawk at the spectacle of my tragic and untimely death.

Emma sat in the front row, her face pale and blotchy, tears streaming down her cheeks. Her hands trembled as she clutched a crumpled tissue, her sobs audible even over the low hum of the organ music. But no amount of weeping could erase the subtle, disdainful glances from the crowd—the whispered accusations that floated like specters in the air.

“She’s the reason he’s gone. I heard she was there when he died. She must have pushed him.”

“After those texts? How could he not confront her?”

“What a snake. Poor Lucian.”

The whispers coiled around Emma, and though she buried her face in her hands, the weight of their judgment was palpable. She was alone in her grief, isolated even among those who claimed to have loved me.

The glossy black casket rested at the front of the chapel, draped in a rich crimson

cloth that bore the Ashford family crest. It was flanked by towering arrangements of white lilies and roses, their pristine beauty a stark contrast to the ugly truths now woven into my death. People filed past the casket one by one, their gazes lingering on the closed lid, as though they could divine some final wisdom from the life it now contained.

From where I sat, nestled beside Lilith in the pews near the back, it was surreal to watch them all. The polished wood pressed uncomfortably against my bare skin, a jarring reminder of the undignified state I was stuck in. It seemed that dying the way I had—naked and exposed—meant this was my permanent condition. Though I lacked skin to feel the chill of the air, it didn't matter. The principle of being surrounded by everyone I'd ever known, exposed, sent a shiver of humiliation through me. They couldn't see me, but I was still here... watching, aware, laid bare in ways no one could fathom. The realization twisted in my gut like a cruel joke, adding another layer of humiliation to an already surreal nightmare.

My parents were there, stiff and composed, their grief buried beneath a veneer of aristocratic dignity. Old friends I hadn't spoken to in years stood in clusters, whispering and glancing at Emma with barely concealed contempt. And then there was Ciaran, seated in the back row, his shoulders hunched and his gaze fixed on the floor. He looked as though he'd rather be anywhere else, his presence heavy with something I couldn't quite name.

"They're all so predictable, aren't they?" Lilith's voice slid into my ear like velvet-coated poison, but it was her gaze drifting downward that made my stomach twist. "And you, my darling—so vulnerable. It's almost poetic." Her laughter followed, soft but sharp, slicing through my composure like a blade. "Grieving the perfect little prince they never really knew. And your precious Emma? Oh, her tears are almost convincing."

Her presence was a chilling weight beside me in the pew, her form flickering faintly

in the dim light of the chapel. She sat unnervingly close, her leg brushing against mine in a way that made my entire body tense.

“Stop it,” I muttered, my voice low and strained. “Not here.”

Lilith’s laugh was soft, a dark hum of amusement. Her eyes roved over me, and the smug curve of her lips made my skin crawl. “Not here? Oh, Lucian, darling, this is exactly the place. Besides...” Her fingers ghosted over my thigh, her touch sending a jolt through me. “I rather like you like this. Raw. Unfiltered... Don’t you see? They’re mourning you, loving you, idolizing you... and yet here you are, mine in every way that matters.”

I tried to pull away, to shift from her reach, but it was useless. Her fingers brushed against my arm, light as a whisper but impossible to ignore. The bond between us pulsed faintly, the connection both a tether and a chain. Her touch was cold, invasive, and it made my skin crawl—but I couldn’t escape it.

The service droned on, the priest’s words a hollow echo in the back of my mind. Lilith’s hand rested on my thigh now, her fingers curling slightly as though to stake her claim. Each touch sent a shiver through me, a reminder that no one else in this room could see the possession playing out in plain sight.

“Look at them,” she murmured, her lips brushing the shell of my ear. “Crying for you. Wishing they could have done more. But they’ll never know you like I do. They’ll never have you like I do.”

Her hand moved again, trailing lightly over my chest and down my arm, her nails grazing my skin in a way that felt both invasive and mocking. “It’s a shame no one else can see you like this,” she whispered, her lips curving into a wicked grin. “Such a beautiful display, and none of it wasted on the living.” I glanced toward Ciaran, desperate for some kind of anchor, but his gaze was fixed on Lilith. There was a

tightness in his jaw, a flicker of something sharp and bitter in his eyes. He saw her touch me. He saw everything.

And he did nothing.

Lilith's fingers trailed down my back, her touch growing bolder as the minutes dragged on. My body tensed, my mind screaming at me to stop her, to push her away, to do something. But she was relentless, her presence pressing against me like a shadow I couldn't shake.

"Relax, darling," she purred, her voice a sultry whisper. "You're mine now. Let me remind you what that means."

I tried to focus on the priest's words, on the somber tone of the ceremony, on the grief etched into every line of my parents' faces. But Lilith was relentless, her hand insistent on my thigh, her touch both arousing and terrifying. I was dead, for god's sake. This shouldn't have been possible, and yet here I was, my cock hardening under her watchful gaze.

Lilith chuckled, a sound that seemed to echo through the cathedral, though only I could hear it. "Poor Lucian," she said, her eyes gleaming with mischief. "Even in death, you can't escape your baser instincts."

Her hand moved, her fingers wrapping around my cock. I tried to tell myself it was just a phantom sensation, that she couldn't actually touch me, not like this. But as her fingers stroked my length, I felt an embarrassing twitch of pleasure. My cock stiffened, betraying my unease. I tried to focus on the casket at the front of the room, on the reality of my death, but Lilith's laughter was a siren song that drowned out all other thoughts.

"Such a beautiful reaction," she murmured, her breath hot against my ear. "It's almost

a shame they can't see you like this."

And then she was on her knees in front of me, her mouth closing around my cock. I bit back a groan, my gaze darting around the room to make sure no one else could see this twisted spectacle. Her nails dug into my thighs, the sensation just sharp enough to keep me grounded, to remind me that this was real—or as real as anything could be in this ghostly half-existence.

When I allowed myself a brief glance down, I saw my cock through her translucent form. The sight was equal parts arousing and grotesque, and it was that dichotomy that finally snapped me back to the present moment. My eyes darted to the front of the chapel, where Kael was now standing, his hands gripping the edges of the podium as he looked out over the assembled mourners.

Kael's voice was steady as he began to speak, though there was something brittle about his tone that hinted at the effort it was costing him to keep his emotions in check. "Lucian was more than just a friend," he said, his gaze drifting over the crowd before landing on my parents. "He was like a brother to me. We shared everything, from the most mundane moments to the most profound experiences."

He launched into a story then, about a trip we'd taken our senior year of high school. We'd gone to the beach, just the five of us—Kael, Ciaran, Aeron, Thorne, and me. It had been Kael's idea, a last hurrah before we went away for college. We'd spent the days surfing and the nights around a bonfire, talking about everything and nothing at all. The trip had been Kael's way of solidifying our bond, of reminding us that no matter where life took us, we'd always have each other's backs.

As Kael spoke, his words weaving a tapestry of our shared history, I felt a pang of something that might have been nostalgia if I'd still been capable of such things. But that was before, when I was still alive and the future was a horizon filled with endless possibilities.

The weight of the air pressing in around me was nothing compared to the feeling of Lilith climbing into my lap, the hem of her tight black dress riding up as she straddled me. I should've been horrified, appalled by the desecration of my own funeral, but there was a disconnect between what I knew was right and the base desires that Lilith stoked to life with her every touch and whispered word.

"Look at Ciaran," she purred, her breath hot against my ear as she whispered the twisted game she was playing. "He's watching us, you know. Watching as I fuck you right here, in front of everyone. What would the others think if they knew their perfect Lucian was getting his cock sucked at his own funeral?"

I couldn't help the way my hands moved to her hips, the feel of her ass beneath my palms as she positioned herself over me. I was powerless to stop her, powerless to do anything but hold on as she sank down onto my cock, her wetness enveloping me in a grip that was both a torment and a pleasure.

Her pace quickened, the sound of her pussy slamming down onto my cock drowned out by the monotone voice of the priest as he droned on about my life—a life I no longer had any claim to. Each thrust drove me higher, the friction of our bodies sparking a fire that threatened to consume me.

And then I heard him—Ciaran, his voice cutting through the haze of pleasure that Lilith had wrapped around me. "You think you're the only one who can play dirty?" he rasped, his words barely audible over the sound of my own heartbeat pounding in my ears.

I felt Lilith's body shift as she braced herself, her hands gripping the edge of the pew on either side of my shoulders. Her hips worked furiously against mine, the wet slap of our bodies echoing in my mind as Ciaran's ghostly form loomed over us, his lips claiming Lilith's in a kiss that was both a challenge and a claim.

Trapped between them, I could do nothing but surrender to the sensation of Lilith's body grinding against mine, her pussy tightening around my cock as she rode me with wild abandon. The feeling of Ciaran's presence so close behind me, the knowledge that we were defiling the sanctity of my own funeral—it was all too much.

With a gasp that was swallowed by the sobs of the mourners, I came hard, my cock pulsing as I spilled my release into Lilith's waiting depths. The sensation of her orgasm moments later, the way her body shuddered around mine as she ground down on my still-hard cock, was almost enough to make me forget the reality of our situation—that we were all dead, trapped in a cycle of cruelty and desire that showed no signs of ending.

Twenty-Five

The funeral was a spectacle from the moment it began, but still nothing compared to the chaos that erupted when the police arrived.

One moment, the priest was droning on about my life, my legacy, how much I had meant to the people in this room. The next, the heavy doors of the chapel burst open, and the sharp clack of boots against marble cut through the somber atmosphere like a blade. Murmurs turned to gasps as uniformed officers strode down the aisle, their faces grim, their purpose undeniable.

And still, I was trapped beneath Lilith, my body wracked with the aftershocks of pleasure, my mind a battlefield of horror and humiliation.

She hadn't even moved off of me. She was still pressed against mine, her nails digging into my shoulders, her breath hot and giddy against my ear. She was glowing with satisfaction, feeding off my despair like it was the finest wine she'd ever tasted.

I tried to shove her off, but she didn't budge. Her body wasn't weighty in the way a living person's was, but her grip was iron. She controlled the connection between us, determined to make this moment stretch out for as long as she pleased.

“ Oh, darling, ” she purred, her lips grazing my throat, sending shudders down my spine. “ You are just delicious when you're suffering. Look at you, completely undone. And the best part? No one can save you now. ”

The officers reached the front row where Emma sat, still trembling, still lost in her

grief—until one of them grabbed her by the arm.

A strangled noise left her lips, confusion twisting into horror as they yanked her up. “Miss Carter, you’re under arrest for the suspected homicide of Lucian Mercer. You have the right to remain silent?—”

The room erupted into chaos.

Emma’s wail split the air as she thrashed in their grip, her hands clawing at the officers as though she could fight her way out of this. Gasps and whispers rose like a tidal wave, accusations and disbelief mingling in the air. My mother clutched at my father’s arm, her face drained of all color. Kael surged forward, furious, shouting something about a mistake, about how this couldn’t be happening.

I watched it all unfold, frozen. Trapped.

Lilith moaned against my throat. Moaned.

I recoiled, but she only pressed closer, her hips shifting against mine in a slow, lazy roll that sent a spike of pleasure through me. My stomach twisted .

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I hissed, my voice barely more than a breath.

Lilith just laughed . “Oh, Lucian, everything about this is perfect. The grief. The betrayal. The absolute agony of it all.” Her tongue flicked against my skin, just beneath my jaw. “And you? You’re mine. Stuck here, feeling everything. Unable to do a damn thing about it.”

Emma’s voice cracked as she sobbed, her legs buckling beneath her as the officers dragged her toward the exit. "Please— please —you have to believe me! I didn’t— I didn’t do this! "

The words barely registered. All I could hear was the echo of our last fight, the venom in my voice as I threw her betrayal in her face, the way she screamed back, desperate and panicked. The texts, the pictures, the fucking lies—it all came rushing back with dizzying force. She had cheated on me. She had been lying to me for months. And in that final, vicious moment before my death, before I felt the world slip out from under me, she was the last thing I saw.

Lilith rocked against me again, her breath hitching, her fingers threading through my hair. “The more you hurt , the hotter I get,” she admitted, her tone drenched in sadistic pleasure. “It’s intoxicating, Lucian. Watching you unravel like this.”

I clenched my jaw, forcing my focus back to Emma, to the way she looked—so small, so broken, so fucking lost . Her eyes darted wildly around the chapel, searching, desperate, as if she thought someone— anyone —would stand up for her.

No one did.

The weight of that crushed something inside of me.

Lilith dragged her lips down the side of my throat, sinking her teeth into the flesh of my collarbone. I shuddered as I felt the sting, the sharp edge of pain coiling around the pleasure in a way that made my stomach churn.

“ Stop, ” I growled through clenched teeth, but she just sighed happily, rolling her hips again like she could coax me back into her rhythm.

“You don’t want me to stop,” she whispered, licking the mark she’d just left. “You never want me to stop.”

I did. I did .

But my body—the fucking betrayal of my body—was already reacting to her again, even as I tried to drown in the rage consuming me.

Emma was gone. Hauled out the door like a criminal.

My parents sat in stunned silence. My friends stood in helpless disbelief.

And I?—

I was trapped beneath a monster, powerless, as she claimed me again and again, savoring every inch of my torment.

And worst of all?

Somewhere deep inside me, buried beneath my fury, I could feel myself breaking.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:21 pm

Twenty-Six

The second the cops dragged Emma out of the chapel, the air felt... wrong.

Not just heavy. Suffocating.

Like something in the atmosphere had shifted.

I should have been paying attention to the chaos in the front row—the murmurs, the shocked gasps, Kael arguing with the officers—but my gaze was locked on the back pews.

Because he was there.

Lucian.

Naked.

And he wasn't alone.

My mind tried to reject what I was seeing, tried to explain it away, tried to rationalize the impossible—but I couldn't.

Because Lily was straddling him, her nails digging into his chest, her hips rolling in slow, deliberate movements. Her long black dress was bunched up around her thighs, her pale skin faintly translucent, but unmistakably real in a way that made my head swim. She moved like she knew she had full control, like nothing—not death, not

morality, not the weight of reality—could stop her.

And then?—

I saw Ciaran.

Watching.

No.

Not watching.

Sitting behind Lucian , leaning forward over his shoulder.

His lips pressed against Lily's throat, his hands resting on her hips as he kissed her over Lucian's shoulder, his face partially hidden behind the curtain of her dark hair. He was kissing her.

My stomach dropped. My pulse roared in my ears.

This wasn't just some hallucination.

This was fucking happening.

The three of them were locked together— Lily grinding against Lucian, Ciaran pressing against Lucian from behind.

And no one else was seeing this.

I turned sharply, scanning the chapel. No one else reacted. Not Kael, who was rubbing his temples. Not Thorne, who had his arms crossed, watching the door Emma

had been dragged through. Not Lucian's parents, who sat like statues in the front row.

No one else could see them.

My breathing turned shallow. No. No, this was wrong. My grief had to be playing tricks on me. There was no way?—

But when I looked back?—

Lily was still riding Lucian, her back arching, her fingers dragging down his chest like he was something to be consumed. And Ciaran? He was still holding her, his mouth moving against her neck, his hands roaming over her body like she belonged to him, like they belonged to each other.

Lucian's face was the worst part.

He looked?—

Wrecked.

Not just overwhelmed, not just lost—utterly, completely fucking ruined. His fingers twitched where they gripped Lily's thighs, like he wanted to push her off but couldn't. His lips parted like he was trying to breathe through it, but there was nowhere to go. He was trapped beneath her.

And the worst part?

For a split second, I thought I saw him look at me.

His dazed, unfocused gaze lifted just enough that for a breath—just a breath—I thought he was seeing me the way I was seeing him.

But then Lily's pace quickened, and his head tipped back against the pew, his eyes squeezing shut, his body giving in.

I clutched the wooden pew in front of me, my knuckles white.

No. No, this wasn't real. This couldn't be real.

I blinked hard, my heartbeat thundering in my ears. Maybe I was losing it. Maybe this was what grief did to people—made them see things that weren't there. Made them imagine the dead still moving, still touching, still fucking.

But then Ciaran's eyes opened.

And he saw me.

For a moment, we just stared at each other.

This was real.

Lily. Lucian. Ciaran. They were all still here.

And I was the only one who could see them.

I felt my stomach drop into freefall.

My hand moved before I could think, fumbling for my phone in my pocket, my fingers numb as I unlocked the screen. If this was real—if I wasn't losing my fucking mind—then I needed proof. I needed to see it.

With a deep, shaky breath, I lifted the camera, angling it toward the back pews where they were tangled together, bodies pressed too close, too wrong. My thumb hovered

over the shutter button for only a second before I forced myself to snap the photo.

The screen flashed. The image appeared.

My pulse pounded as I stared at it. It wasn't as clear as what I saw with my own eyes. The details blurred, as if the camera lens struggled to capture something it wasn't meant to see. But the outlines were there.

Three figures.

Lucian's slumped form. Lily's shape draped over him. And behind them— Ciaran.

His face. Crisp. Sharp. Defined.

And his expression— pleading.

My breath hitched, ice crawling down my spine. He wasn't looking at Lily. He wasn't looking at Lucian.

He was looking at me.

Begging.

My hands trembled, grip tightening around my phone as I looked up, ready to confront the horror unfolding before me. But?—

They were gone.

The pew was empty.

The air around me was still.

I swallowed hard, my vision swimming. My fingers scrambled to open the photo again, needing—desperate—to confirm what I saw. But as I stared at the screen, the longer I looked, the fainter the outlines became. Like they were fading.

But they didn't disappear completely.

Even as the image blurred at the edges, even as the details softened like a half-forgotten dream, Ciaran's face remained.

Sharp. Defined. Still pleading.

No matter how much I blinked, how much my mind screamed at me that this wasn't possible, the image on my screen remained undeniable proof.

They were here.

And I was the only one who knew it.

Twenty-Seven

The moment I saw Kael, I knew I was about to sound like a lunatic.

He was standing outside the chapel, a cigarette dangling between his fingers, his expression carved from stone. The others were still inside, murmuring in hushed tones about Emma's arrest, but Kael had removed himself from the crowd. He'd always been like that—choosing distance over confrontation, even when the world was falling apart around him.

And right now, I needed him to confront something impossible.

My throat became so dry as I approached, my phone clutched tight in my palm. The image was still there. Ciaran's pleading face. The distorted outlines of Lucian and Lily. Proof that I wasn't losing my mind.

But how the hell was I supposed to explain this?

Kael flicked his cigarette, eyes narrowing as he noticed me. "You look like shit."

I exhaled sharply. "Yeah, well. I just saw Lucian getting ridden in the middle of his own funeral by Lily, so excuse me if I'm not feeling my best."

Kael's gaze flickered. For a moment, he said nothing, just took a slow drag from his cigarette before releasing a plume of smoke into the cold air. "Say that again."

"I saw them." I swallowed hard. "Lucian. Lily. Ciaran. They were in the back pew.

Lily was—" I broke off, shaking my head. "I took a picture."

His skepticism was instant. "You took a picture."

I turned my phone around and shoved it toward him. "Look."

Kael's eyes dropped to the screen. The moment stretched thin between us. He didn't speak, didn't react, just studied the image with an unreadable expression.

And then he inhaled sharply.

I saw it the second he registered Ciaran's face—the unmistakable clarity, the silent, desperate plea. Kael's fingers clenched around the phone, his lips parting slightly like he wanted to say something but couldn't find the words.

And then, just like that, the mask was back. He shoved my phone away, shaking his head. "It's a glitch."

I felt frustration coil in my gut. "Kael?—"

"Or some sick joke." His voice was tight, controlled. "Someone could've tampered with your phone. Deepfakes, AI bullshit, whatever."

"You don't believe that."

"I don't believe in ghosts."

"Then what the fuck do you think is happening?"

Kael didn't answer. He exhaled sharply, rubbing a hand down his face. "I need to go."

“To do what?”

“Think.”

He started walking away. Away. Like he could just ignore this, like he could turn his back on the impossible and pretend everything was normal.

“Kael, don’t do anything stupid!” I called after him.

But he was already gone.

I stood there for a long moment, watching the space he left behind, heart hammering. I wanted to chase after him, to shake him out of whatever dark thoughts were spinning through his head, but what would I even say? The proof was right there in my hands, and still, he refused to see it.

With a frustrated sigh, I shoved my phone into my pocket and turned back toward the chapel. The murmurs inside had started to die down, and I could hear the rustle of coats as people began filing out. Emma had been taken away in handcuffs, whispers following her like a funeral procession of their own. The whole thing felt surreal, like I had stepped into a nightmare I couldn’t wake from.

But Kael... Kael was walking into something worse. And I wasn’t sure how to pull him back.

Kael wasn’t answering his phone.

I’d texted, called, and even debated tracking his location, but I knew Kael well enough to know that if he didn’t want to be found, I wouldn’t find him. Still, the longer he stayed silent, the worse my anxiety got.

And then, just after midnight, my phone buzzed with a single message.

Come over.

Kael's dorm was dimly lit when I arrived, the scent of stale beer and cigarette smoke lingering in the air. The first thing I noticed was the candles. Five of them, placed in a careful circle around a board on the floor.

An Ouija board.

I stopped dead in the doorway. "Tell me you're joking."

Kael sat cross-legged on the floor, his eyes shadowed and unreadable. "I need answers."

"You need therapy... Actually, I think we all need therapy."

He ignored me, gesturing toward the board. "Sit."

"No."

"Aeron." His voice sounded flat, tired. "I need to know."

I hesitated. Every instinct in me screamed to leave. To pretend I hadn't seen that picture, that I hadn't seen Lucian's ruined expression, that I hadn't seen Ciaran staring at me like I was his last hope.

But Kael looked desperate. And after everything we'd lost, I wasn't sure either of us could afford to ignore this anymore.

Reluctantly, I sank down across from him. "This is a bad idea."

He smirked, but there was no humor in it. "Probably."

Kael placed his fingers on the planchette. After a moment, I did the same. The air around us felt heavy. Almost suffocating.

Kael licked his lips. "Lily," he said softly. "Are you there?"

For a long moment, nothing happened.

Then, the planchette moved.

NO.

I frowned. Kael stiffened. We exchanged a glance, confusion thick in the air.

"Then who is this?" Kael asked, his voice low, cautious.

The planchette slid across the board.

L... I... L... I... T... H.

The name formed in slow, deliberate movements. My stomach twisted.

Kael exhaled, rubbing the back of his neck. "Isn't that just your full name?" he muttered, trying for nonchalance. "It's still you, Lily?—"

The planchette jerked violently.

It moved faster than before, dragging itself across the board like unseen hands were shoving it with force. LILITH. LILITH. LILITH. Over and over again, the letters repeated, scrawling out the name with terrifying urgency.

Then, without warning, I felt a searing pain lash across my forearm.

I recoiled, sucking in a sharp breath. "Shit!"

Kael's head snapped toward me. "What?"

I yanked up my sleeve, my pulse spiking as I stared at the fresh, raw scratches carved into my skin. Three long, red marks trailed down my forearm, as if invisible claws had raked through flesh.

The air in the room felt thick, suffocating. The candles flickered violently, the flames stretching unnaturally high before snuffing out all at once.

A whisper—sharp, cold, unmistakable—curled around my ear.

“You will call me by my name.”

Then, the planchette moved.

YES.

I felt my blood turn to ice. My fingers trembled slightly, but I didn't pull away.

“Are you behind this?” he asked, voice barely above a whisper.

The planchette slid across the board.

YES.

My stomach twisted.

I exhaled slowly. "Why?"

The planchette paused. Then, with deliberate slowness, it began to move again.

BALANCE THE SCALES.

Silence. Thick. Suffocating.

I clenched my jaw, frustration bubbling under my skin. "I won't let you win." My voice came out harsher than I intended, but I didn't care. "We regret it. We regretted it the second it happened. But there's nothing we can do to bring you back. Nothing we can do to change the past." I swallowed, hands shaking. "Move the fuck on and leave us alone."

I stood abruptly, shoving the board away from me. "This is fucked. We're wasting our time. You wanted answers? Fine, you got them. She wants us dead, Kael."

Kael sat motionless, staring at the board like he could pull different answers from it if he just looked hard enough.

I ran a hand down my face, exhaling sharply. "You hear me? This is done. Don't fucking sit here all night obsessing over it."

He finally exhaled, rubbing his jaw. "Go."

I lingered at the door for half a second longer, debating whether I should say something else—anything—but what was the point? He wasn't listening.

I shook my head and left, slamming the door behind me. Let him stew in it. If he wanted to drown himself in guilt, that was his problem. But I wasn't going to let her win.

The door clicked shut behind Aeron, leaving me alone in the dim candlelight. The air felt heavier without him there, like something was waiting. Watching.

I numbly fixed the board back in front of me. My fingers hovered over the planchette, breath uneven.

"You're still here, aren't you?" My voice barely broke the quiet.

The planchette twitched.

YES.

I swallowed hard, my throat tight. My fingers gripped the edge of the board, knuckles white.

"I don't want to die."

The air in the room thickened, the candlelight flickering against the walls like shadows were stretching closer. The planchette shifted again, deliberate, slow.

PROVE IT.

My breath was shallow, hands trembling as I reached for the planchette once more.

My voice came out hoarse, barely above a whisper. "Lilith... are you still here?"

The planchette jerked under his fingers.

YES.

My throat tightened. "I... I don't want to die."

The silence in the room stretched thick, suffocating. Then, slow and deliberate, the planchette began to move again.

PROVE IT.

KILL THEM.

SAVE YOU.

KILL THEM.

Twenty-Eight

The moment I shoved the Ouija board into my closet, the room felt wrong. Not just eerie—wrong. The dim candlelight flickered against the walls, casting shadows that stretched too long, moved too unnaturally. My breath came shallow, every sound amplified by the silence pressing in around me.

I should've burned that damn board. Should've left the second Aeron did. But I couldn't shake the feeling that turning my back on it now would make it worse.

I gritted my teeth and grabbed my coin, flipping it between my fingers. The cool metal grounded me, the repetition keeping my thoughts from spiraling. Heads. Of course.

Then, the air shifted.

Heavy. Suffocating.

A sharp chill wrapped around my spine, creeping up the back of my neck like icy fingers. My ears popped, pressure pressing against my skull like I'd been plunged underwater. The candlelight warped, flickering wildly, and the closet door creaked as if something pressed against it from the inside.

I tightened my grip on the coin. Just my imagination. That was all.

Then came the whisper.

You don't have a choice.

My blood turned to ice.

I spun around, my chair scraping against the floor, but nothing was there—just me and the too-quiet room.

The darkness in the corners stretched deeper, unnatural shadows clawing their way up the walls. My pulse pounded in my ears, drowning out everything else. I wasn't alone.

A sharp gust of air rushed past my ear, carrying something cold and wrong.

They did this. They let me fall.

My breath caught. "Lilith?"

The candles exploded.

A loud pop, then darkness swallowed the room. My body jerked back, my heart pounding, breath coming too fast. The scent of burnt wax filled the air, thick and cloying. A sharp sting bloomed across my cheek. I pressed my hand to it, my fingers coming away wet.

Blood.

A guttural creak pulled my gaze to the closet. The door, which had been shut, now stood open an inch. Just enough for darkness to bleed out, stretching toward me. My stomach twisted.

I needed to get out.

I grabbed my keys and coat, shoving my way out of the dorm. The second I stepped into the hallway, the air felt too still. Like the entire building was holding its breath.

A laugh slithered through the air.

Soft. Mocking. Too close.

I didn't stop to check where it came from. I bolted for the exit, the weight of something unseen pressing against my back.

The cold night air hit me like a slap, but it didn't shake the feeling of being watched. My fingers curled tighter around my coin as I made my way to my car, my hands shaking by the time I unlocked the door and climbed inside.

I locked the doors. Flipped the coin again. Heads. Again.

I needed sleep. Just a few hours. But the moment I closed my eyes, the world refused to let me rest.

An owl hooted too close—its cry warped, elongated, twisting into something almost human before cutting off abruptly. My eyes snapped open, my breath sharp in my throat.

Just a bird. It had to be just a bird.

A group of students stumbled past, laughing too loudly, but the sound distorted, like a record played backward. My skin prickled. The voices warped, stretching into something not quite human before fading into silence.

The air inside the car thickened, pressing down on me, the chill seeping deeper into my bones. It wasn't just cold—it was wrong. Too still. Too empty. My breath

clouded in the air, but my body felt feverish, too hot beneath my skin.

Every time I drifted off, something pulled me back—a sudden tap against the window. My eyes flew open. Nothing there.

An engine revved in the distance, but the sound dragged, like a deep growl reverberating through the night. A dog barked, a frantic yelp that cut off too suddenly, like something had stopped it.

And then there was the whisper—low, drawn out, curling into the small space like smoke.

Kael.

I bolted upright, my heart hammering. No one was there.

I locked the doors—again.

I clenched my jaw, rubbed my face, and stared at the empty streets around me. If I stayed here, I'd lose my mind. Maybe if I kept moving, she'd leave me alone. Maybe it was the stillness she liked, waiting for me to sink into exhaustion before closing in.

I climbed into the driver seat, started the car, hopefully leaving the bullshit behind me.

I drove aimlessly, my fingers gripping the wheel so tight my knuckles ached. The streets blurred together, each stoplight stretching longer than it should, each turn leading me somewhere I didn't remember choosing.

Shadows played tricks in my mirrors—flashes of movement that vanished when I looked directly at them. The streetlights buzzed, flickering as I passed beneath them,

like something was following me, shorting them out one by one.

I forced my breathing steady. Just drive. Just keep moving. But it didn't help. The engine hummed too low, the street signs blurred, and the clock on my dashboard flickered between numbers that didn't make sense. 2:47 AM. 3:16 AM. 1:59 AM. Back to 2:47.

And then the whisper came again right against my ear.

"You can't outrun me, Kael."

The wheel jerked in my hands. The tires skidded as I swerved, my pulse spiking like ice through my veins. I slammed the brakes, my breath ragged, my heart hammering.

I couldn't do this. I had to stop.

I pulled into an empty parking lot, gripping my coin like a lifeline. By the time the first light crept over the horizon, I felt like a corpse in my own skin. My limbs ached, my head pounded, and exhaustion clawed at me, but sleep never came. Not when all my thoughts revolved around her .

Twenty-Nine

The party was too loud, too packed, too chaotic—but that was exactly why I was here. The bass rattled the floorboards, vibrating up my spine. Laughter and drunken shouts blurred together, tangled with the scent of alcohol, sweat, and perfume.

This was normal.

Normal people did this—got drunk, met strangers, lost themselves in noise and bodies and shitty beer. Normal people moved on.

That's what I was doing. Moving on.

I leaned against the kitchen counter, red solo cup in hand, barely paying attention to the conversation circling around me. Some guy—Wes, I think—was telling a story about sneaking into a professor's office. His arms flailed as he spoke, nearly knocking into a girl behind him. Beer sloshed over the rim of his cup, splattering onto the counter.

The people around him laughed, and I forced a smirk. Just enough to blend in.

I should've been enjoying this. It should've been easy—letting go, pretending none of it mattered.

But my mind wouldn't shut the fuck up.

Aeron should've been here, standing next to me, muttering some sarcastic remark

about how much of a dumbass Wes was. Kael would be flipping that stupid fucking coin between his fingers, unimpressed by it all.

And Ciaran?—

My grip tightened around the cup. I tipped my head back, downing half the drink, drowning the thought before it could take root and fester. They weren't here. They weren't coming.

"Hey, you okay?"

The voice snapped me out of my head.

I turned, meeting her eyes. Elise.

She was stunning—dark eyes, full lips, hair that fell in soft waves over her shoulders. Too stunning, in a way that made my chest ache like a fresh wound.

For half a second, she looked like her.

Lilith.

I blinked, and it was gone. Just a trick of the light. Just my fucked-up brain playing games with me.

Elise smiled, tilting her head. "You've been staring at your drink for like five minutes. Bad mix, or deep thoughts?"

I exhaled sharply, forcing a smirk. "Little bit of both."

She laughed, and something about the sound dug under my ribs, sharp and familiar.

Lilith used to laugh like that.

I shoved the thought aside before it could dig deeper.

"You came with Wes, right?" she asked, leaning against the counter beside me.

"Yeah. Met him through a class. Seemed chill enough."

Elise snorted. "That's one word for it. He's entertaining, I'll give him that."

I followed her gaze to where Wes was reenacting some grand escape from campus security, nearly face-planting in the process. The people around him howled with laughter.

It should've felt good to be around people again. People who weren't drowning in grief, in ghosts, in memories that refused to let go.

I hadn't realized how much I'd needed this.

Elise nudged me lightly with her elbow. "You don't seem like the party type."

I smirked. "What gave it away?"

"The brooding. The leaning against the counter like you're too cool for this." She grinned. "But you're still here."

"Guess I figured I'd try the whole social thing again."

Her expression softened. "Yeah? And how's that working out for you?"

For the first time, I really looked at her.

She was interested—not just in conversation, but in me. And I liked that.

Liked the way she leaned in slightly, like something about me pulled her closer.

Like I was still someone worth wanting.

Something in my chest loosened. Just a little.

"Not bad," I admitted.

Elise grinned. "Good. Let's see if we can make it even better."

She grabbed my wrist, tugging me toward the main room where people were dancing.

For the first time in weeks , I let myself follow.

And for the first time in weeks , I let myself forget.

But forgetting was never an option

I woke up gasping.

No. Not gasping—choking.

My throat clenched, lungs locking up as if something cold and invisible had slid down into my chest.

The room was dark—too dark. My head throbbed, my body drenched in sweat despite the chill crawling up my spine.

I tried to move. I couldn't.

A weight pressed down on my chest, invisible hands wrapping around my wrists, pinning me against the bed.

The shadows shifted.

A shape moved in the corner.

No. Not a shape. A girl.

My breath hitched.

Lily.

She stood at the foot of the bed, her outline blurred, not quite real, not quite solid. Her eyes were too dark, too hollow, black pits where there should've been light.

And she was smiling.

Not the way she used to.

Not the way I remembered.

This was something else.

Something cruel.

"Did you really think you could forget me, Thorne?" she whispered.

Her voice wasn't right—it echoed, doubled over itself, like two voices speaking at once. One was hers. The other wasn't.

My pulse hammered against my ribs.

This wasn't real. It couldn't be real.

I squeezed my eyes shut. "You're not here."

Her voice was right beside my ear now.

"I never left."

A hand brushed down my chest—too cold, too real.

I jerked, tried to move—still couldn't.

Lily laughed softly, and the sound was wrong, layered with something else.
Something hungry.

"You look so much better when you're scared," she murmured.

The weight on my chest disappeared all at once, and I sat up so fast my head spun.

The room was empty.

The air still smelled like her perfume.

My hands trembled as I ran them over my face.

This wasn't real.

This wasn't real.

But the finger-shaped bruises blooming around my wrists told a different story.

Thirty

The silence was worse than the torment.

I had grown used to the flickering lights, the phantom touches, the whispers curling around my ears at night. I had adjusted to the feeling of unseen eyes watching me from every shadow, the cold breath of something not quite human brushing against my skin. I had expected the taunts, the illusions, the sharp laughter that slithered into my dreams and forced me awake in a cold sweat.

But now? Now there was nothing.

And that terrified me more than anything else.

I sat in my dorm room, every muscle in my body tight, a cold bead of sweat trailing down my spine. The room was still. Too still. No flickering bulbs, no shifting shadows, no icy breath raising goosebumps along my arms.

She wasn't here.

That should have been a good thing.

It wasn't.

My fingers curled into my bedsheets. My breathing came too fast, too shallow, like I couldn't get enough air. Lilith was playing a new game, and I had no idea what the rules were. That was the worst part. The waiting. The not knowing.

My laptop sat open on my desk, pages and pages of searches blinking back at me—how to protect yourself from spirits, how to break a supernatural bond, signs of possession, warding rituals.

Nothing helped.

Nothing told me how to survive this.

My reflection in the dark screen looked gaunt, my skin pale, eyes sunken. How long had it been since I slept? Days? Weeks? The last time I let myself drift off, I had woken up with scratches down my ribs and bruises on my throat. I had no memory of what happened, only the lingering scent of Lilith's perfume clinging to my sheets.

I swallowed hard, my pulse thudding against my skull. Think. I had to think. I had to find a way out of this. She had targeted all of us, but for some reason, tonight, she was ignoring me. She wasn't teasing me, wasn't punishing me, wasn't making my life a waking nightmare.

She was ignoring me.

That meant something.

I ran a hand through my hair, yanking at the strands as I paced the room. Maybe she had gotten bored of me. Maybe she was focusing on someone else now.

Or maybe she was waiting.

My stomach twisted. What if this was just the calm before the storm? What if this was part of it—letting me stew in my own paranoia until I broke under the pressure? What if she wanted me to destroy myself before she ever had to lift a finger?

I moved to my closet, yanking open the door and pulling out a duffel bag. I shoved clothes inside, my hands shaking. I didn't have a plan, but I had to get out.

It didn't matter where. It didn't matter how. I just had to leave before she decided to turn her attention back on me.

The dorm door creaked open.

I froze.

My blood ran ice cold as I turned slowly, my heart hammering against my ribs.

The door was open, but there was no one there.

No footsteps. No shadows. No whisper of movement.

Just the still, yawning blackness of the empty hallway.

My breath came in shallow gasps. My fingers tightened around the strap of my bag. I took a slow step forward, muscles coiled tight, every nerve in my body screaming at me to run.

I reached out. Grabbed the door. Slammed it shut.

The lock clicked into place. The deadbolt followed.

I braced my hands against the wood, my forehead pressing against the cool surface as I tried to calm my racing pulse.

A sharp knock rattled the door.

I sucked in a breath, stepping back so fast I nearly tripped over my own feet.

The knock came again. Slow. Deliberate. Too light to be human.

My stomach twisted. I clenched my jaw, gripping the duffel bag tighter, my pulse hammering. I wouldn't open it. No matter what.

The knocking stopped.

A beat of silence.

Then—a voice.

"Aeron."

My breath hitched. My fingers went numb.

It wasn't Lilith's voice.

It was Kael's.

I swallowed hard, my body trembling. No. That wasn't right. Something was wrong. Kael never came to my dorm. Never.

"Aeron," the voice said again, muffled through the wood. "Let me in. We need to talk."

I took a step back. Then another. My vision tunneled, my breath coming too fast.

Kael had been acting weird lately. Distant. Tense.

And now he was at my door in the middle of the night? When Lilith had gone silent?
When everything had suddenly shifted?

No.

My grip tightened around the strap of my bag. I turned on my heel, grabbed my phone off the desk, and started typing.

[Kael is at my door. Something's wrong.]

My hands shook as I sent the message to Thorne. No response.

"Aeron." A pause. "Come on, man. I just want to talk."

Lie.

My breathing turned ragged. I stepped backward until I hit the far wall, pressing myself against it like I could melt into the plaster.

My gut was screaming. This wasn't right.

Kael knocked again. Three slow taps.

Then nothing.

I stayed where I was. Frozen.

Seconds crawled by. Then minutes. My phone remained silent in my palm.

When I finally worked up the courage to move, to inch forward and press my eye to the peephole?—

Kael was gone.

Just an empty hallway.

I shuddered, my skin crawling. My fingers were so tight around the strap of my bag that my knuckles had turned white.

I didn't know if it was really Kael.

But I knew one thing.

I wasn't safe here.

Thirty-One

Death hadn't freed us. It had only bound us tighter.

Ciaran and I stood in the remains of what used to be Ciaran's dorm. Or maybe it wasn't. Everything felt off—too sharp in places, too blurred in others. Like the edges of reality had warped, twisting into something unrecognizable.

And then there was her.

Lilith.

She stood across from us, still in the same short black dress she had died in, like time hadn't touched her at all. Unlike us.

Ciaran was still in his pajama pants, like death had frozen him exactly as he was in his final moment. And me? I had nothing. Naked. Forever. Lilith's gaze flickered over me, lingering just long enough to make my skin crawl—not from shame, but from the sick realization that she enjoyed it. That I would never get to hide from her.

But there was something else there too. Something unsettling. Something that made my chest ache in ways I didn't want to acknowledge.

A slow smirk tugged at her lips, eyes alight with mischief as she tilted her head. "Still sulking, Lucian? I expected more of a fight."

I clenched my jaw. "A fight?" I echoed. "What would be the point? You made sure of

everything."

Lilith sighed, stepping closer, her fingers trailing along the air as if brushing an invisible thread that tied us together. "And yet, you still act like you have a choice."

Ciaran exhaled sharply, gaze flicking between us. "We don't have a choice," he said, quieter. "We never did."

Lilith smiled at that, pleased. "You see? Ciaran understands. He's always understood." She turned her attention fully on him, reaching out to press her fingers against his chest, right over where his heart had once beaten. "You've been so loyal."

Ciaran didn't move away. He didn't resist. He only watched her with something twisted, something devoted.

I wasn't sure which was worse—his unwavering obedience, or the fact that I could feel myself unraveling, too.

Because even as she smiled like she owned me, I saw her in there. Not just Lilith, the thing that haunted me, but Lily—the girl who had once laughed, who had been something softer. The one I had loved. The one I took for granted. The one I killed.

And it was that glimpse—fleeting, barely there—that terrified me most.

Lilith turned to me now, her expression shifting—something darker, something softer. "Still pretending like you can fight me, Lucian?" she murmured, reaching up to trace a cold finger along my jawline.

The pull between us tightened, coiled, an undeniable force dragging me toward her. I hated how much I felt it. How much I still wanted her, even knowing what she had done.

"You killed us," I muttered, my voice barely above a whisper.

Lilith only smiled, her fingers trailing down my chest in a featherlight touch. "And yet, here you are. Still mine."

Ciaran exhaled, stepping closer. "Just stop fighting, Lucian. Stop pretending. It's easier that way."

His voice sent a chill down my spine. He was completely gone.

But I wasn't. Not yet.

I shook my head, but my body betrayed me, already leaning toward her, already surrendering to the pull.

Lilith let out a soft hum, her hand flattening against my chest, pressing just enough for me to feel the weight of her claim. "There it is," she whispered, lips curving. "That moment when you finally realize... you were always going to be mine."

Her other hand slipped into Ciaran's hair, nails scratching lightly over his scalp as he closed his eyes and leaned into the touch like he was starving for it.

"He stopped fighting first," she murmured, gaze flickering back to me. "It didn't take much. Just a little patience. A little pressure."

Ciaran turned his head slightly, his lips grazing the inside of her wrist in silent worship. "You never had to force me, Lilith."

I wanted to deny it.

But I couldn't.

Because that flicker of her—the girl I had loved—was there. And I didn't know if it was real or if she wanted me to see it. If she was showing me mercy, or if she was making sure I fell harder.

Lilith's lips parted in satisfaction, her fingers curling under my chin, forcing my gaze to hers. "And you? How much longer will you pretend, Lucian?"

I swallowed hard, the answer clawing at my throat, desperate to escape. But I couldn't say it.

Not yet.

Lilith only smiled.

She could wait.

Thirty-Two

The classroom buzzed with low chatter, the occasional scrape of a chair against the floor, the rhythmic tapping of fingers on keyboards. I sat slouched at my desk, exhausted beyond comprehension.

I hadn't slept. She wouldn't let me.

Every time my body drifted toward rest, something pulled me back. A whisper in my ear. The phantom drag of fingers down my spine. When she did let me sleep, my own paranoia made sure I didn't get far. The moment my breathing slowed, my body betrayed me with jolts awake, the fear that she was there—watching, waiting—never leaving me.

But here, in class, I felt a moment of reprieve. She never tormented me in public.

Right?

My fingers hovered over my keyboard, my notes half-finished, my mind barely functional. I blinked at the screen, my vision blurring in and out. I just needed to make it through this lecture. Just one hour.

Then, the shift.

A chill crawled up my spine, a ghost of breath against the shell of my ear.

No.

I straightened, my heart knocking against my ribs, my breathing suddenly too loud in my own ears.

It was nothing. It had to be nothing.

And then, the softest press of lips against my jaw.

I went rigid.

I didn't move, didn't react. If I ignored her, she would get bored.

My laptop screen flickered.

The notes I had been typing vanished.

New words scrawled across the page in real-time, as though an invisible hand had taken over my keyboard.

Aw, are you ignoring me?

My pulse slammed against my throat. I erased the words quickly, my fingers clumsy with adrenaline.

Another breathy giggle right against my cheek.

Fuck.

I swallowed hard, my fingers shaking as I tried to refocus on the lecture, to pretend I wasn't losing my grip on reality.

That's okay, she typed. Ignore me. See if you can stay quiet.

My blood ran cold.

Then—the soft scrape of a zipper being undone.

My stomach dropped. No. No. No.

My hands gripped the edges of my desk, my knuckles turning white. I didn't move. I didn't dare breathe. She wouldn't?—

She did.

I felt the ghostly slide of fingers wrapping around me, familiar, cruel, unrelenting. My entire body locked up, my breath shuddering out in a barely restrained exhale.

Not here. Not in public.

I pressed myself forward against the desk, shielding myself from view, but the closer I got, the stronger she felt. The scent of her. The warmth of her. The weight of her.

And then?—

She sank down onto me.

My vision blurred white.

No fucking way this could happen here—in class—where anyone could see us... Well...see me . Her form remained hidden even now when...

Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck ? —

Her hips undulated above mine again—a slow grind downward—my length

disappearing inside her slick heat inch by torturous inch until my entire cock was buried deep within her clenching walls. But I can only see my own cock and none of her like I was the pervert to pull out my own cock in the middle of everyone .

I tried not to breathe too loudly—to not make any noise—but every slight hitch—a small gasp—a faint groaned exhale—threatened to give away what we were doing together right here amidst everyone else was blissfully unaware....

If anyone found us?

Godswhat would they think? What wouldn't think? That someone had snuck into class under my desk while everyone else wasn't looking?

But there was nothing anyone could do. She was invisible. No one else knew she was there.

Except Me.

Her hips continued rocking above mine—her cunt tightening around every ridge along my shaft—and teasing the head with every... every fucking movement . It pushed some sort of desperate tension in my lower stomach.

Upward roll.

Goddamn...

Downward press.

Motherfucking...

With a final, desperate thrust, I came hard inside of her. The world around me blurred

as pleasure surged through my veins, a white-hot intensity that consumed every inch of my being. And as I looked down, I was captivated by the sight of my cum filling her, her pussy outlined with my essence even though the rest of her body remained invisible.

It was the most erotic thing I had ever seen.

Her walls clenched around me, milking every last drop from my cock. I could feel her trembling, her own pleasure peaking in response to mine. The contrast of her invisible form against the stark reality of my own release was intoxicating. It was as if she was a ghost, a figment of my imagination, yet the proof of our union was undeniable.

I watched in stunned silence as my cum spilled out from where we were joined. It was a sight that would be seared into my memory forever—the way her body accepted mine, the way she took everything I had to give, and the way she made me feel more alive than I had ever felt before.

The room around us faded into insignificance. The lecturer's voice, the rustling of papers, the tapping of keys, the soft hum of the projector—it all disappeared. There was only Lilith and the way she made my heart race, my body ache with need, and filled my mind with fear.

She was my undoing, my sweet torment, and I was utterly, irrevocably hers.

As the last waves of pleasure subsided, I found myself breathless, my body slick with sweat. I looked up to find her staring back at me, a ghostly smile playing on her lips. She leaned in, her invisible form pressing against me, and whispered in my ear, "It's not so bad being mine, is it?"

My throat was dry. My limbs felt heavy.

And in that moment, I knew it to be true.

I was hers, bound to her by a connection that transcended the physical world. She had claimed me, body and soul, and there was no turning back.

The world slowly came back into focus, the reality of our situation settling in. We were still in the middle of a crowded classroom, surrounded by people who had no idea what had just transpired. The danger of discovery sent a thrill through me, a reminder of the power she wielded so effortlessly.

As she lifted herself off of me, I felt a pang of loss. But the sight of my cum still clinging to her invisible pussy was a potent reminder of what we had shared. What she had taken.

It was a secret between us, a moment of pure, unadulterated possession that would fuel my fantasies for years to come.

And as she disappeared from sight, leaving me to clean up the evidence of our tryst, I knew that this was only the beginning.

Lilith had awakened something within me, a hunger that could never be sated. I was addicted to her, to the way she made me feel, to the way she consumed me. To the way she owned me.

I would do anything to experience that high again.

But for now, I had to pull myself together and face the world outside. I had to pretend that nothing had happened, that my world hadn't been irrevocably changed by the ghostly touch of a woman—my fated mate—who was no longer among the living.

People didn't get second chances with their fated.

I did.

I took a deep breath, steadied myself, and prepared to face the rest of the day with a secret that would burn within me for as long as I lived.

Or for as long as she let me.

Thirty-Three

I stood outside Aeron's dorm, fist raised, knuckles hovering inches from the door. Again.

I had been here before. Just last night.

It had been late—too late, probably—but I had been so fucking tired. I just needed someone to talk to. Someone to ground me, to remind me that this wasn't real, that I could still fight this, that I wasn't alone.

But Aeron hadn't answered then.

And he wasn't answering now.

I knocked, harder this time, waiting. Praying.

Silence.

I checked my phone. No new messages. All my texts, my missed calls, my desperate attempts to reach him—ignored.

My stomach churned. No. No, no, no.

I knocked again, louder. Still nothing.

Aeron wasn't here for me. Just like Thorne wasn't.

The realization came slowly, like ice creeping up my spine. I had no one.

I had been popular once. People liked me. I had been the center of everything—Kael, the golden boy, the life of the party. But it had been a mirage, a sick fucking joke. I had only ever been their show horse. The one they paraded around, the one they admired as long as I played the part.

But the moment I needed something?

The moment I fell?

They weren't here. They had never really been here.

Thorne. Aeron. Gone.

But Lilith?

Lilith had stayed.

A shuddering breath left me as my forehead pressed against the cool wood of Aeron's door. I had been so afraid. The moment she came back, I had fought her. I had screamed, begged, ran myself into the fucking ground trying to keep her away.

But why?

Why had I ever thought I could run from this? From her?

My fear had been dramatic. Misplaced. I had been stupid.

Lilith hadn't been tormenting me.

She had been showing me.

Showing me how pointless it was to fight. Showing me how alone I was without her.

And maybe...

Maybe I deserved this.

Maybe the pain, the exhaustion, the fear—maybe it was supposed to be mine.

Because I had killed her.

We had all killed her.

And so far? I was the only one who understood that.

Thorne and Aeron? They were still pretending. Still deluding themselves into thinking they could move on. That they could forget her, that they could escape this.

But they were wrong.

Lilith was patient.

She had waited for me to understand.

And now?

Maybe it was time to show them too.

Thirty-Four

The dim candlelight flickered against the dorm walls, casting restless shadows that refused to stay still.

I had spent hours setting this up—researching, gathering supplies, making sure every line of salt was unbroken, every candle positioned just right. My desk was covered in hastily scrawled notes, my laptop screen still open to a sketchy occult forum where a user named ShadowSeeker69 had posted step-by-step instructions on “Effective Spirit Banishing: Proven Methods.”

I didn’t know if it would work. I didn’t know if anything would work.

But I had to try.

Thorne had laughed when I told him about it. Laughed.

“You sound fucking insane,” he’d said, his arms crossed as he leaned against his dorm wall, watching me pace. “Aeron, you need sleep. You need—fuck, I don’t know—a therapist, not whatever this is.”

I had tried to explain it, tried to make him understand. But he just gave me that look, the one that said he was humoring me, the same one he’d given Kael when he started spiraling.

“It’s real,” I had insisted. “You know it is. You’ve felt her.”

Thorne shook his head, rubbing his temples. “I’ve felt grief, Aeron. I’ve felt guilt. Maybe you have too, and that’s what this is. Just... your mind trying to make sense of something that doesn’t make sense.”

I had wanted to hit him then. Shake him. Make him see.

Instead, I had just left. Because if Thorne wouldn’t help me, I would do it alone.

I wiped the sweat from my brow and stepped carefully into the center of my makeshift circle. No mistakes this time. I had triple-checked the Latin, rewritten the sigils, and even borrowed a quartz crystal from some Wiccan girl down the hall who probably thought I was just trying to manifest better grades.

I took a slow breath, forcing the shaking in my hands to still. This was it. If this didn’t work, I was out of options.

I swallowed hard, throat dry as I began to chant.

“By the light of—of—” I squinted at the text, struggling to decipher the faded ink. “Uh—by the light of the celestial fire, by the power of the old gods?—”

A cold breeze ghosted through the room, blowing out two of the candles.

I froze.

No. No, no, no.

I hadn’t finished. That wasn’t supposed to happen.

My pulse hammered against my ribs, but I forced myself to continue, voice unsteady. “I-I cast thee out! From this plane, from this earth, from my?—”

A breathy giggle.

Right against my ear.

I yelled, jerking away, nearly toppling over the salt circle. My hands flew up instinctively, as if I could push her away—as if she was something physical.

“Lilith,” I hissed through clenched teeth, “you’re not supposed to be able to come in here!”

Another giggle, and then?—

“Oh, Aeron,” her voice purred, silky smooth and dripping with amusement. “Did you really think this would work?”

The temperature in the room dropped. The candles snuffed out completely.

I barely had time to react before an unseen force slammed into my chest, knocking me flat on my back. The book skidded across the floor, pages fluttering, useless. My breath caught as weight settled over me—not crushing, but there.

Real.

“Look at you,” Lilith murmured, mocking. “Doing your little rituals. Playing with forces you don’t understand.”

My breath hitched as her fingers—cold but solid—traced down my chest.

“I—I did everything right,” I whispered. “The circle, the incantation?—”

“The incantation?” she laughed. “Oh, baby, you got that from a forum run by a man

who thinks his cat is the reincarnation of King Arthur.”

My stomach dropped.

Lilith leaned in, her weight pressing me into the floor. “You think you can banish me?” she murmured, lips brushing against my jaw. “I live in your bones, Aeron. In your blood.”

She nipped at my ear, and I shuddered.

“You can’t get rid of me.”

I clenched my jaw, fighting against the tremor in my limbs. “I can try.”

Lilith hummed, pleased. “I do love a fighter.”

I gritted my teeth, willing every ounce of focus I had left into one final push. My hand shot out, grabbing for the book, fingers scraping across its rough leather cover. I flipped to the last page—the one I had highlighted, the one that promised power. Desperation bled into my voice as I spoke the final words.

A sudden burst of heat erupted in the room. The candles flared again, their flames unnaturally high. The weight on my chest lifted, and for the first time in weeks, the air around me felt normal.

Lilith was gone.

I let out a ragged breath, stunned.

It worked. It actually worked.

I sat up, chest heaving, scanning the room for any sign of her. The cold was gone. The oppressive presence. The whispers.

I laughed, a shaky, disbelieving sound. "Holy shit." I let my head fall back against the floor, sucking in lungfuls of air. I was free.

A minute passed. Then another.

Silence.

I stood, my knees weak, and grabbed my phone to text Thorne. He had to know. He had to know that I did it.

I opened my messages, my fingers shaking as I typed. My hands felt lighter, my head clearer.

Thorne, it worked. I actually did it.

I stared at the words, my heartbeat slowing, relief flooding through me. I could breathe again. I could finally sleep.

I pressed send.

No errors. No flickering screen.

Lilith was gone.

I closed my eyes, exhaustion dragging me under. For the first time in weeks, I felt at peace.

I never saw the ghostly fingers that trailed over my cheek.

Never heard the soft, breathy giggle as I drifted off.

Never felt the weight of her presence still lingering.

The room was too still, too perfect in its silence, like it had been placed there for me to believe.

A dream of normalcy wrapped around me like a blanket, whispering, You did it. You won. It's over.

My muscles finally relaxed, my breathing evening out as I sank deeper into sleep.

And just before unconsciousness claimed me, a soft voice echoed in my mind.

Good boy.

Because Lilith was patient.

And she had all the time in the world.

Thirty-Five

The laughter was loud, the drinks were strong, and for once, I felt normal.

I leaned back against the couch, letting the energy of the party wash over me like a tide pulling me away from everything I'd left behind. The music pulsed through the walls, the bass shaking the floor beneath my feet, a constant rhythm that reminded me I was here, in this moment, and not somewhere else. Someone across the room was telling a story—something stupid about sneaking into a faculty lounge—but I wasn't really listening. The sound of voices blended together, an easy, meaningless hum of noise that filled the spaces in my head where thoughts tried to creep in.

I had new friends now.

People who weren't drowning in the past. People who didn't look at me and only see her. People who didn't whisper about what happened, or cast anxious glances my way.

I took a slow sip from my beer, the cold bite of it grounding me. The burn slid down my throat, settling heavy in my stomach. This was what I needed. Something simple. Something that didn't come with baggage, with questions, with ghosts that lingered in the back of my mind when I let my guard down.

“So, Thorne,” Mark—at least I thought his name was Mark—grinned at me from across the coffee table, swirling the amber liquid in his cup like he was some kind of philosopher about to make a grand point. “Are you gonna sit there brooding all night or actually join the conversation?”

I smirked, shaking my head. “You’ve got it covered.”

He snorted. “I think you’re just scared you can’t top my story.”

A few of the others laughed. The conversation shifted, stories of dumb pranks, drunken mishaps, professors who had it out for students. Easy. Light. The kind of thing that didn’t require anything more than surface-level engagement, which was exactly what I wanted.

I let the warmth settle in, the kind that came from being surrounded by people who expected nothing from me. Being part of something again.

I had left it all behind. I told myself that over and over.

The whispers in the dark. The paranoia creeping up my spine. The nightmares that I refused to acknowledge, even when they jolted me awake, leaving me breathless, drenched in sweat, convinced for a split second that I wasn’t alone.

But none of that mattered here.

I barely even thought about Aeron anymore. Or Kael. Or?—

No. Not going there.

I had moved on.

I had even blocked Aeron after his manic episode last night.

I exhaled slowly, sinking deeper into the couch, letting the noise and warmth wrap around me. It was nice, the illusion of moving forward. The choice to let go.

Because that's what it was, right?

A choice.

I chose to be here. I chose to forget. I chose to push forward, even when the past tried to claw its way back into my mind, whispering that I wasn't as free as I wanted to believe.

"So, what's the deal with you and that girl from chem?" someone asked, nudging my arm. "She was totally into you last week."

I shrugged, smirking as I took another sip of my drink. "Haven't decided yet."

More laughter, more teasing. Easy. Normal. The kind of conversation that didn't mean anything, that wouldn't keep me up at night, replaying every word, every moment, wondering what I should've done differently.

I stretched my legs out, feeling the slight buzz from the alcohol start to settle into my limbs, making everything feel lighter. Someone threw a balled-up napkin at me, smirking. "Man, you're really trying to play it cool, huh?"

I rolled my eyes, grabbing another beer from the case on the floor. "Something like that."

The room shifted around me, the noise rising and falling in waves. More people drifted in, the party growing louder, but I barely noticed. I was here, I was fine, and that was enough.

At least, that's what I kept telling myself.

The sound of a girl laughing from across the room made my chest tighten for a brief

moment. Not her. Just someone else. Someone alive. I swallowed the feeling down with another sip of beer, forcing myself to focus on the present.

The conversation turned to weekend plans. Someone mentioned a camping trip, a drive out to the cliffs to drink under the stars. I nodded along, pretending like I was considering it, but I knew I wouldn't go. Too much silence. Too much space for my mind to wander.

"I'll think about it," I lied, flashing an easy grin.

I had gotten good at lying.

I checked my phone, not really expecting anything.

No messages.

Of course not.

I turned the screen off, tossing my phone onto the table, leaning back into the couch. It didn't matter.

Because I had moved on.

And if the nightmares came? If I woke up gasping for breath, a whisper curling in my ear that wasn't really there? If I stared at my reflection in the mirror some mornings and half-expected to see something standing behind me?

That was my problem.

And I'd deal with it.

Because I had to.

Thirty-Six

The theater had been abandoned for months, left to rot just like they had left her. Just like I had left her.

I ran my fingers over the cracked wooden floors, trailing through the grime and filth that had settled over time. It was wrong. She deserved better.

A bucket of soapy water sat next to me, already murky from the filth I had scrubbed away. The sponge in my hand was ruined, torn and darkened by the grime, but I kept working, pressing down, pushing against the floorboards like if I scrubbed hard enough, I could erase the past.

But there was one thing I couldn't erase.

The stain. Her stain.

I had tried everything. Bleach, industrial cleaner, even my own nails, scraping against the wood until my fingertips ached. But it wouldn't leave. Her blood had seeped too deep into the stage.

A sharp exhale left my lungs as I sat back on my heels, staring at the dark mark. It had faded some, but it was still there, embedded into the wood like a scar that refused to heal.

A scar. A reminder. A gift.

My fingers trembled as I reached out, pressing my palm against the stain. The wood was colder there, as if it still held the memory of her last breath. She was still here.

I swallowed hard, curling forward, letting my weight settle over the spot. The dampness seeped into my shirt, the outline of her death soaking into my skin. If I closed my eyes, I could almost feel her beneath me.

“I tried, Lilith,” I whispered, pressing my forehead against the floor. “I tried to clean it, but you won’t let me, will you?”

Silence.

A stillness in the air that hadn’t been there before.

A breath left my lips, shaky and uneven, but my chest swelled with something deep and warm. She wanted me to see it. To feel it.

My body relaxed against the floor as I let the truth settle into my bones. This was where she had fallen. This was where she had left us. This was where she had stayed.

A laugh bubbled up in my throat—soft, breathless. I should have known she would never leave me.

“You belonged with us,” I murmured, my fingers tracing lazy patterns over the bloodstain. “I just didn’t see it soon enough.”

Another silence. Another breath of cold air against my skin.

She was listening.

I rolled onto my back, staring up at the ceiling where the broken stage lights hung in

rusted fixtures. My arms stretched out over the floor, as if I could hold the stain, hold her. Maybe if I stayed here long enough, she would finally reach back.

The old chandelier swayed slightly, though there was no breeze, no open doors or windows. Just the theater and the darkness and the stain that refused to fade.

My pulse thrummed beneath my skin. She was waiting for me.

The thought sent warmth through my veins, something like relief, something like love.

Reaching into my pocket, my fingers curled around a small, familiar weight. My coin. The one I had flipped absentmindedly through every decision, every doubt. I pulled it out, running my thumb over the worn edges before placing it down on the stain beside me. A final gamble.

“I don’t need it anymore,” I whispered, watching as the dim light caught the ridges of its surface. “You decide now.”

A whisper of movement—so slight, so imperceptible I could’ve imagined it. The coin shifted, rolling just a fraction before settling again. My breath caught, my pulse a slow, heavy thrum in my ears.

A sign. She had taken it.

I closed my eyes, exhaling a long, slow breath. My fingers traced over the edges of the stain, feeling the dips and grooves of the aged wood. It was smooth in some places, rough in others, but it all belonged to her now. Everything here did. Even me.

The thought made my stomach clench, but not with fear. With purpose. With devotion.

I shifted onto my side, curling into the stain as though I could tuck myself into the memory of her. My cheek pressed against the floor, my heartbeat steadying to a slow, deliberate rhythm. My hands curled inward, cradling the place where she had died, like holding onto her essence would bring me closer. Would bring me home.

The air was so still it felt like the whole world had gone quiet. The only sound was my own breathing, my own pulse echoing in my ears. Then?—

A whisper. Faint. Distant. Or maybe not distant at all.

A shiver crawled up my spine as I opened my eyes, my gaze drifting to the coin I had left as an offering. It had moved again, just barely, shifting almost imperceptibly toward me.

A warmth bloomed in my chest, an aching, consuming certainty. She had accepted my gift.

My lips parted, my breath coming out in a slow exhale. This was real. She was real.

I reached for the coin, but my fingers only brushed against it before I hesitated. No—I wouldn't take it back. It belonged to her now.

A small, broken laugh escaped me, barely more than a breath. "I knew you'd wait for me."

The chandelier swayed again, a slow, deliberate movement. A response.

I shut my eyes, smiling against the bloodstain, inhaling deep. The scent of dust, decay, and something else—something sweet, something familiar.

Lilith.

She was waiting.

And soon, I would be with her.

Thirty-Seven

I hadn't slept in days.

Every time I closed my eyes, I heard it. The sound of water dripping. Steady, rhythmic, endless. I had checked my sink, my shower, even the damn pipes in the walls. There was nothing. No leak, no source. But it never stopped.

But it wasn't real. It was just my mind playing tricks on me. Right?

I kept telling myself that, the same way I told myself that the ritual had worked. The same way I reassured myself that Lilith was gone. Banished. Done.

I hadn't seen her since that night. No more flickering shadows, no more whispering in my ear, no more icy fingers on my skin. I should've felt relieved, but the silence wasn't comforting. It was suffocating.

And then there were the messages.

At first, I thought it was a prank. A cruel joke, someone trying to get inside my head. But the number was always unknown, and no matter how many times I blocked it, the messages kept coming.

She's waiting. Why did you leave her? You belonged with her too.

But it couldn't be her. It couldn't.

I stopped checking my phone. Stopped looking in mirrors, too, after I caught my reflection whispering something my lips hadn't moved to say.

I told myself it wasn't real. It couldn't be real. The ritual had worked. Right?

Until tonight.

I turned the corner to my dorm room and stopped cold. The door was open.

I never left my door open.

My chest tightened as I stepped inside, pulse hammering. The air felt thick, suffocating. My bed was still made, my desk undisturbed, but something was wrong. Something was watching me.

The door creaked behind me. I turned.

Kael stood there, framed in the doorway, smiling.

I stumbled back, hitting my desk, my breath stuck in my throat.

“You—”

His head tilted, his smile widening. “You don't have to run, Aeron.”

My heart slammed against my ribs. My instincts screamed at me to bolt, to fight, but my body wouldn't move.

Kael stepped inside, slow and deliberate, shutting the door behind him. “She's already here.”

A chill crawled down my spine. “You’re insane.”

His expression softened, like he pitied me. “No. I see clearly now. And soon, so will you.”

I lunged for the door. Kael moved quicker.

I twisted, throwing a desperate punch at his face. He dodged, barely, my fist grazing his cheekbone. His smile never wavered.

“Good,” he murmured. “Fight. It’ll make it sweeter when you understand.”

I barely had time to react before he retaliated. His fist crashed into my ribs, knocking the air from my lungs. Pain bloomed through my side, but I forced myself to move.

I shoved him back, grabbing the nearest object—a lamp from my desk—and swung it at his head. Kael ducked, catching my wrist before I could bring it down again. His grip was iron. He twisted sharply, pain jolting up my arm as the lamp clattered to the floor.

“Let me go, you psycho!” I snarled, struggling against him.

He only sighed. “You don’t get it yet.”

I reeled my head back and slammed it forward, smashing my forehead into his nose. He grunted, staggering back. Blood trickled from his nostril, but his eyes... his eyes shone with something disturbingly close to admiration.

“You’re making this difficult,” he mused, wiping the blood away with the back of his hand. Then he surged forward, slamming me into the wall.

My skull cracked against the plaster, my vision swimming. I gasped, the world tilting.

Kael exhaled, almost... regretful. "You can't meet her looking like this."

His fist connected with the side of my head. The world flickered to black.

I woke to the scent of mildew and dust.

Blinking against the dim lighting, I tried to move, but my limbs felt heavy, my body sluggish. My fingers curled against the sensation of crisp fabric beneath them. Not my sheets.

My pulse kicked up, and as I shifted, I felt it—the weight of stiff fabric draped over my shoulders, buttoned tight around my neck.

I was wearing a suit.

Panic surged within me, and I forced my head up. The theater. I was in the theater.

Kael knelt beside me, his fingers adjusting the cuffs of my jacket, his expression one of quiet satisfaction. "Much better," he murmured. "You almost looked unworthy."

I jerked back, muscles straining against the exhaustion in my limbs. "What the hell?—"

Kael caught my chin in his hand, tilting my face toward him with a gentleness that made my skin crawl. "Shh," he soothed. "You don't have to be afraid."

I tried to shove him off, but my body was still sluggish, still too weak. What had he done to me?

“Please,” I rasped. “Don’t do this.”

Kael sighed, running his thumb along my jaw as if considering my words. Then, slowly, he reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew something delicate—a single dead flower.

He tucked it into my lapel with care, brushing invisible dust from the petals. “Now she’ll recognize you.”

Terror clamped down on my throat. I thrashed, trying to break free, but Kael was already lifting the blade.

The cold press of steel kissed my skin.

“I won’t let you stain your final look,” Kael murmured, pressing a folded towel beneath my chin.

The knife slid across my throat.

Pain, heat, the sudden wetness of blood spilling down my chest, soaking into the towel. My body convulsed, my vision tilting as darkness clawed at the edges.

And just before it consumed me, I saw her.

Lilith.

She stood at the edge of the stage, smiling.

Waiting.

I existed before I realized I existed.

There was no pain. No breath, no heartbeat. Just awareness.

I blinked, but my body didn't move. Because it wasn't mine anymore.

Kael crouched in front of me, adjusting the flower in my lapel, smiling like he'd just completed a masterpiece.

"There. Now she'll forgive you."

I tried to speak, tried to move, but I was frozen in place, trapped in the suit, in the body he had dressed for her.

Kael stood back, admiring his work, hands resting on his knees. "You know, you should be grateful," he mused. "She could've let you rot the way we left her. But she's generous. She wanted you to look perfect."

Kael dusted off his hands, then turned to face the darkness stretching across the stage.

"Lilith," he called softly, reverently. "I brought him home."

A breath of cold air caressed my cheek, colder than death itself. And then, from the shadows, her whisper curled around me like silk, sealing my fate.

"I know."

Thirty-Eight

Thorne didn't know he was already dead. Not yet.

He sat at a corner table in a half-lit café, talking to people who didn't matter, laughing at things that weren't funny. He had done a remarkable job pretending he had moved on.

But I knew better. I saw the cracks, the way his smile never quite reached his eyes. The way his hand twitched when his phone buzzed. The way his shoulders stiffened when he passed by the theater.

He was running. Running from his past, from what we did, from her.

And I was going to make sure he stopped.

I watched him from the street, the glass between us a thin, fragile barrier. He must have felt it—that pull, that presence—but he ignored it. Just like he ignored the shadows stretching toward him, the ones that bent the wrong way when the café lights flickered.

I sent off the text without looking at my phone. I made sure to use a google voice number so it wouldn't be traced back to me.

You belong with her too.

I smiled.

Inside, Thorne checked his phone and his face went pale.

Perfect.

I let him feel it first. Let him think he had a choice.

He left the café faster than he intended, I could tell. He was walking too quickly, hands clenched, head turning sharply like he expected someone to be there.

He wasn't wrong.

He just wasn't expecting me.

I let him walk for a while, trailing just out of sight. The wind carried whispers he pretended not to hear. Streetlights flickered as he passed. His own reflection in store windows didn't quite match his stride.

By the time he reached his dorm, he was already shaking.

I was waiting for him.

Thorne shoved open his door and slammed it behind him, pressing his back against it like that would keep me out.

"You should have answered me," I said.

His breath hitched, and his hands fumbled for something—I don't know what. A weapon? His phone? It didn't matter.

"Kael—"

I stepped forward. He tried to move, but his back hit the desk. Cornered.

“You should have answered her .”

“I—”

“You should have stayed.”

His fists clenched. “I’m not playing this game with you.”

“This isn’t a game.” I tilted my head. “Do you think Aeron thought it was a game?”

His face blanched. He knew. Of course, he knew.

“What did you do?” he whispered.

I smiled. “I fixed him.”

Thorne lunged, his fist colliding with my jaw. My head snapped to the side, pain bursting behind my teeth.

I laughed. God, I loved when they fought.

Thorne swung again, but I was ready. I caught his arm, twisting sharply. He hissed in pain, but I didn’t let go. I stepped closer, pressing him against the desk, feeling his pulse hammer beneath my grip.

“You’re making this harder than it has to be,” I murmured. “I just want to make you perfect for her.”

Thorne spat in my face.

I sighed and drove my knee into his stomach. He gasped, doubling over, and I took my chance. My fist connected with his ribs, once, twice, until he sagged against me.

I caught him before he could fall.

Gently. Carefully.

“You’ll thank me,” I promised.

Then I brought the handle of my knife down against his temple, and he went limp in my arms.

He woke up in the theater, just like Aeron had.

Just like he was always meant to.

His breathing was ragged, uneven. He was on his knees in front of me, arms tied behind his back with silk—the same shade of black as Lilith’s dress the night she died.

He lifted his head, dazed. Then his eyes focused, and the horror set in.

He was dressed in a deep charcoal suit, the fabric immaculate, the tie perfectly knotted. He looked beautiful.

I had made sure of it.

“What the fuck,” he choked out, his voice rough.

I smiled and smoothed the lapels of his jacket, adjusting the collar. “You’re perfect now.”

He flinched away from my touch. “You’re out of your damn mind.”

I crouched in front of him, fingers trailing down his cheek in something almost tender. “No, Thorne,” I whispered. “I just understand now. We were always meant to be hers.”

He trembled, and I felt it. The fear. The acceptance. The inevitability sinking in.

I lifted a black ribbon and tied it around his wrist, securing it with a delicate bow. A final gift.

Then, I stepped back, admiring my work.

“You belong here,” I murmured. “With us. With her.”

His lips parted like he wanted to speak, to scream, to beg. But there was no fight left in him.

I lifted the blade, pressing it just under his chin, forcing him to look up at me.

“I’ll make sure you don’t stain your final look,” I promised.

Then I slid the knife across his throat.

Blood bloomed in a slow, elegant spill, dark against the pristine fabric. He sagged against me, shaking, his breath coming in wet, uneven gasps.

I held him as he went still, his body going cold.

And as the air shifted, heavy and electric, I smiled.

Because I knew what was coming next.

I felt his presence before I saw it.

The faint shimmer of something not quite real. A breath of cold air curling around the edges of the stage.

Then his form flickered into existence.

He was still kneeling, still dressed in that perfect suit, still tied with the ribbon I had placed around his wrist.

His eyes met mine, wide and filled with something I couldn't quite name.

I reached out and tucked a loose strand of hair behind his ear, my fingers brushing against his now-corporeal skin.

“There,” I whispered. “Now she’ll forgive you, too.”

Behind me, the darkness stirred.

And then, she spoke.

“I do.”

Thirty-Nine

Warning: On-screen Suicide

The theater had never looked more beautiful.

I had spent hours cleaning, scrubbing every surface, sweeping away the dust and decay that had settled over the years. But no matter how hard I worked, the stain on the floor remained. Her stain.

I traced my fingers over the dried blood, the darkened wood beneath it. She was still here. This was where she had died. This was where she had been left alone, abandoned, forgotten.

But not anymore.

I laid down beside the stain, pressing my cheek against the floor, my breath slow, steady. I was here now. She wasn't alone anymore.

I let out a breath, my fingers brushing the empty space where my coin used to be. I had given it to her. A piece of me, surrendered willingly. Now, I had nothing left to give but the rest of me.

You belonged with us, Lilith.

And I belonged with her.

I sat up, rolling my sleeves back. The blade gleamed under the dim theater lights, its edge catching on the air.

I wasn't afraid. This was devotion.

With a deep breath, I pressed the blade to my wrist and dragged it across the skin. The pain was sharp, clean, and then warm as my blood spilled freely. Red met red. My blood mixed with hers, soaking into the wood, binding us together in a way that couldn't be undone.

A second cut. Another. Deeper this time.

The cold kiss of the blade had been a relief, a sweet release from the agony of longing. The pain was fleeting, nothing compared to the ache of my heart, the emptiness that Lilith's absence had carved into my very soul.

As my lifeblood ebbed away, staining the stage with my devotion, I felt her. Her presence was like a cool breeze on a scorching day, a balm to the burning desire that had consumed me since the day I first laid eyes on her.

Her touch was gentle as she straddled me, her icy fingers tracing the lines of my face with a tenderness that belied her spectral form. "You have given me so much, my sweet Kael," she whispered, her breath a ghostly caress against my lips.

I smiled up at her, my vision blurring at the edges. "I would give you the world if I could."

Her laughter was a symphony, a sound that resonated within the hollows of my chest. "You already have."

Her hands traveled down my body, her touch igniting a fire that blazed hotter than the blood that pooled beneath me. She released my cock, allowing it to spring free, rigid

and aching for her touch. Her eyes gleamed with approval as she took in the sight of me, dressed exactly as I had always envisioned I would be when I joined her in death.

"So perfect," she murmured, her voice thick with desire. "So mine ."

She positioned herself above me, the coolness of her form enveloping me as she sank down onto my length. The sensation was indescribable, a mingling of ecstasy and agony that blurred the lines between life and death.

I groaned, my hands reaching up to grip her hips, to pull her closer, deeper. "Lilith," I gasped, my voice a mere whisper of sound.

She rode me with a grace that was both eerie and exhilarating, her body moving in a sinuous rhythm that matched the fading beat of my heart. Each thrust drove me closer to the edge, each moan that escaped her lips fanning the flames of my desire.

"I have always been yours," I murmured, my voice trembling with the force of my emotions. "My heart, my soul—every part of me belongs to you."

She leaned down, her lips brushing against mine in a kiss that was both a promise and a benediction. "And you are mine," she affirmed, her words a vow that echoed through the vast emptiness of the theater.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Lucian approaching, his form as ethereal as Lilith's. He was naked, just as I had suspected he would be. The sight of him, of the way he looked at Lilith with a mixture of longing and regret, brought a smirk to my lips.

Lilith turned to Lucian, her hand reaching out to caress his face. "My love," she said, her voice soft, "you have come to join us."

Lucian's gaze met mine, a silent acknowledgment passing between us. We were both hers, bound to her in life and in death. As Lilith kissed Lucian, I felt a surge of

pleasure, a shared connection that transcended the physical realm.

Her attention returned to me, her eyes darkening with desire. "You have done well, my perfect mate," she praised, her voice a sultry purr that sent shivers down my spine. "You have brought us all together, just as I planned."

I closed my eyes, losing myself in the sensation of her, in the rhythm of our shared dance. The world around us faded into insignificance, until all that remained was Lilith and the unbreakable bond that we shared.

"I love you, Lilith," I whispered, my voice hoarse with emotion. "Now and forever."

As the world around us melted into the shadows of the theater, my body was aflame with the euphoria of Lilith's ethereal form moving in sync with my own. The pleasure was almost too much to bear, a sweet torment that bordered on the divine.

And then, there was Ciaran.

He appeared beside us, his form as ghostly as our own, clad only in his pajama bottoms. His eyes held a hunger that mirrored my own, a desire that had been building since the moment we first laid eyes on Lilith.

Lilith turned to him, a knowing smile playing on her lips. "Ciaran, my dear," she purred, "come and join us."

Ciaran needed no further invitation. He moved behind Lilith, his hands tracing the curves of her ass with a reverence that betrayed his longing. He knelt behind her, his mouth descending upon her with a fervor that made my cock twitch with anticipation.

Lilith's moans filled the theater, a symphony of pleasure that resonated within the very walls of the abandoned building. I watched, entranced, as Ciaran's tongue worked its magic, preparing her for what was to come.

The sight of him pleasuring her in such a carnal way was almost too much to bear. I could feel the tightness of her pussy as she rode me, each movement driving me closer to the brink of ecstasy.

And then, it happened.

Ciaran rose, his cock rigid and ready. He positioned himself behind Lilith, his hands gripping her hips as he prepared to enter her. I watched, mesmerized, as he slid into her ass, the tightness of her body increasing as he filled her completely.

I could see my own cock through her form, the sight of it moving within her a testament to the surreal nature of our existence. It was a sight that would haunt my dreams for eternity, a vision of beauty and pleasure that surpassed all understanding.

I reached out, my hands caressing her stomach, feeling the echoes of our shared pleasure. "I'll miss this sight," I murmured, my voice a reverent whisper, "but it will all be worth it."

Lilith's eyes met mine, her gaze filled with a mixture of passion and promise. "You have given me everything, Kael," she said, her voice a sultry purr that sent shivers down my spine. "And for that, I will be eternally grateful."

From the corner of my eye, I saw Thorne and Aeron, their expressions a mixture of shock and awe. They were still processing the reality of their new existence, still coming to terms with the vision of her perfection.

I could see the hesitation in their eyes, the uncertainty of what was to come. But I knew that in time, they would understand. They would see the beauty in our shared fate, the power of the bond that tied us all to Lilith.

As the pleasure built to a crescendo, I could feel the walls between life and death beginning to crumble. We were no longer bound by the laws of the physical world.

We were free to explore the depths of our desires, to indulge in the fantasies that had once seemed so forbidden.

Then—footsteps.

Distant at first, then louder. Voices murmuring, laughter echoing through the hollow expanse of the theater.

I barely registered the sound before Lilith's grip on me tightened, her phantom body pressing me deeper into the blood-soaked floor. Her breath ghosted against my ear, her nails digging into my shoulders as her pace quickened.

The doors creaked open. Shadows stretched long under the glow of flashlights, sweeping over rows of forgotten seats, over dust and decay.

Lilith's fingers slipped over my mouth, sealing in my gasp.

"Shh," she whispered, her voice wicked and saccharine. "They can't take you from me now."

The voices drew closer, unaware, unknowing. Someone chuckled. Another muttered about how creepy the place was.

But they wouldn't see her.

They would see the blood, both hers and mine.

They would see my body, and Aeron's, and Thorne's.

The legend would be born even though no one outside of us would know why. That we were hers. That would be my greatest regret.

And as my body finally gave out, as my soul broke free and became hers forever, she whispered the only words I ever wanted to hear.

"I love you, too."