



SPEARCREST KINGS BOOK FOUR

SPEARCREST

*Wolf*

AURORA REED

# Spearcrest Wolf

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# SPEARCREST WOLF



*Ardentes  
Fortuna  
Invat*



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## Content Warning

This book may contain themes and content that some readers may find sensitive or triggering. Please be aware of the following potential triggers and themes within the book: **graphic violence, death, attempted sexual assault, mental health issues, dark themes such as childhood trauma, abuse and loss.**

*This one is for the girls who wish men were as loyal as dogs.*

# BOOK ONE



*The Loneliest  
Socialite  
in London  
&  
the Blood Wolf  
of Yalinka*



# Black Lake

## Iakov

EVERY YEAR IN YALINKA, on the last day of the summer, the village boys gather for the Blood Moon.

Yalinka is the small Ukrainian town I grew up in. It lies on the western edge of Ukraine, in the Eastern Beskids. Mount Hoverla looms over it like a grim guardian. As for the Blood Moon—it has nothing to do with the moon. It's just named that because it happens at night.

It *does* have to do with blood.



FOR THE BLOOD MOON, every boy in Yalinka gathers in the forest at the edge of town.

The forest is a little past the church and the old wooden signpost, behind the decrepit building of the old primary school, which burned down. Nobody dares go too far into the forest. It's too deep and dense, and sometimes the mist that falls from Mount Hoverla is so thick you can't even see your own hand at the end of your arm. The town is full of stories of children going missing in the woods.

So the boys gather at the edge, where the trees are sparser. They wait for nightfall, and then they strip to the waist. Everybody has to do it, and then everybody has to fight and keep fighting. As long as it takes.

When there's nobody left to fight, and you're the last person standing, you become the Blood Wolf. It's that simple.

And once you're the Blood Wolf, you have power over all the other boys for that year.

It's an important ritual in Yalinka. Everybody knows about it because the ritual started long before the village boys' fathers or *their* fathers. Nobody knows *how* it started, or *why*. Everybody has theories, and each family in Yalinka has their own fable of horror about what happens if you shirk the ritual.

Every boy in Yalinka grows up in the shadow of the ritual, just like the town exists in the shadow of the mountain and the forest. It looms over every boy, a waiting giant that must one day be defeated.

I spend my entire childhood dreading it.

Because everybody knows this: if you're there, you have to fight.

If you've split the skin above your eye, and you can't see because of the blood, you don't get to just stop fighting. Your best bet is to crawl to safety and run through the forest. You should only do that if you're certain you can outrun any pursuers. Because if someone spots you running and gives



chase, and they catch you, then you're going to get it worse than if you'd stayed.

That's exactly what happens to me.



MY FIRST BLOOD MOON, I cry.

I've spent so long dreading it, and I'm so afraid. But my friend Maksym says we have to go. His family says that if you don't go to the Blood Moon, all the daughters in the family get ill. Maksym has an uncle who didn't go, for three years, between ages thirteen to sixteen. On his sixteenth birthday, his sister, who was only seven, died of pneumonia.

"You have to go," Maksym says to me on the day of our first Blood Moon. "You have to go for Lena, so nothing happens to her."

We've both just turned ten, and we're about to start middle school.

"If you don't fight," says Maksym, "you're prey. Lena will be prey. You *have* to fight."

We go. We walk past the church and the wooden signpost and behind the charred carcass of the old primary school. We stand at the edge of the forest, where a bonfire is burning, and we take our shirts off. I'm shaking, and I can see the sweat on

Maksym's forehead even though a cold wind is already blowing from the mountain.

That night, I don't even try fighting. I turn and run.

I'm only ten years old. I'm scrawny because there's never quite enough food at home, but I'm athletic; I play all the team sports at my school, I wrestle and I run track. I'm not strong but I'm fast. I figure running is the smart thing to do.

It's not.

Two fifteen-year-olds see me and chase me into the forest. They run me down, grab me by my arms, rip my clothes off me and throw me into the lake.

Everybody in Yalinka knows and fears the lake. There's a legend that an old lady killed herself by wading into it with rubble in her cardigan pockets when her husband was taken as a prisoner of war back in the Soviet days.

Nobody believes the story, but everybody tells it. And everybody is afraid of the lake.

That night, when the two boys strip me and throw me into the lake, I'm certain I'm going to die.

That night, I find out how cold and empty and black death is. I thrash in the icy black water, gasping water into my panicked lungs. I'm more afraid at that moment than I've ever been in my life. The funny thing is that, after that night, I stop being afraid of death.

That night, I see the old woman, the one who killed herself. She reaches for me through the black void of the water, and

her hands are cold and clammy around my throat. The terror and pain inside her seep into me, nestling inside my chest like an egg. I carry it with me wherever I go after that.

At school, I'm no longer afraid of fights and beatings. If the older boys try pushing me around, if they become too rough, there's a darkness inside me where the fear used to exist. I'm certain it's my own death—that the old woman put it inside my chest, and now it lives inside me, waiting.

My own death makes me numb, but it makes me strong.

At first, I think it must mean nothing can hurt me.

I'm wrong.



THE YEAR I TURN eleven, I make sure I'm ready for the Blood Moon. After school, I run around the track in endless loops. During gym class, I set record after record at sprinting, climbing the rope, wrestling. I make sure I can outrun anything and anyone.

During the Blood Moon, when the fighting starts, I turn and sprint through the trees. Five boys give chase. Not one of them manages to catch me.

I make it through the Blood Moon unscathed.

So that year, the Wolf punishes me for my arrogance. Maybe that, and maybe it's the curse, punishing me for not fighting.

Every day, after the school day is over, the Blood Wolf and his friends wait outside school. But not for me—for Lena.

My little sister is two years younger than me. She's gentle as a rabbit and just as shy. She likes sitting on the floor in our living room with one knee hugged to her chest, painting pictures with the little watercolour set she got as a prize for drawing the best picture in her class.

Lena wants to grow up and become an artist, and she likes singing and reading stories and looking at clouds. She loves flowers, especially sunflowers; she paints them all the time.

The Wolf and his friends just follow Lena, at first. They probably don't want to hurt her—but they need to punish me. And everybody in Yalinka already knows I don't feel pain or fear. Even the adults are a little afraid of me, ever since I crawled out of the black lake when I was ten and walked home, silent and muddy. Nobody looks me in the eyes, and everybody avoids me.

So the Wolf and the other boys—and maybe the curse as well—have to find another way of punishing me.

At first, they follow Lena, just enough to scare her. Then, they start pushing her around. Taking her books out of her arms. Pulling on her hair and kicking her legs. Dragging her backpack off her and emptying it across the road.

Lena gets upset every time, but she just gathers her things and walks home.

Then, one day, she comes home late. Her hair is dirty and knotted up. There are bruises on her legs and scratches on her face. Her eyes and nose are pink with crying.

“What happened?” I ask her.

She says something, her words broken by sobs. I stand in front of her and push back her hair, which is as fair as mine is dark and wet with her tears. Her cardigan is messy, and her socks and shoes are wet. She’s not wearing her school bag.

“Where’s your backpack?” I ask.

“The—the lake!” she wails.

I dry her tears and sit with her, holding her. She tells me about the boys grabbing her on her way home from school, dragging her to the woods, pushing her around, scaring her. How they took her bag and tossed it into the lake and told her to go get it. How they forced her to walk to the end of the rickety wooden pier and how she stood there and shook and wept while they laughed at her.

I listen in silence, holding her close.

Later, after our mother comes home from her second job, the one at the local supermarket, I tell her to look after Lena and make sure she’s alright.

Then I go to the lake. I wade into the dark water and swim out into the middle of the lake. It’s late in the evening in the middle of winter. The water is so cold it makes my teeth

chatter until they hurt. It's—the cold black of hell. The dead woman's presence fills the water as if she's waiting for me, my kicking feet right out of reach of her grasping hands.

*Iakov, I almost hear her say. You belong to the darkness, not to the world. It waits for you.*

I ignore her voice. I grope for the backpack, grab it by its strap, and swim back to the surface. That's when I realise *why* Lena was so upset.

She's not upset because she was hurt or scared.

She's upset because her watercolour set was in her backpack, and now it's destroyed, the colours washed away by the lake. I sit at the edge of the water, kneeling in the sedges, and stare at the empty plastic tray in the faint moonlight, shuddering in the cold air, water dripping from my clothes.

“What do you want with Lena's colours?” I ask the dead woman through my chattering teeth. “You live in the dark.”

She doesn't answer.

There's nothing I can do about Lena's colours. Our mother's already struggling with money, and I'm still too young to work, though not for long. I can't replace Lena's watercolours—not yet. But I will. I swear it to myself.

One day, I'll be so dirty, disgusting rich that I'll buy Lena a thousand watercolour sets. I'll buy her the colours out of the rainbows. I'll buy her anything she wants, and I'll use all my money to keep her safe and happy forever.



THE NEXT DAY, I find the Wolf outside school. He stands by the trunk of an old spruce tree, smoking cigarettes with his friends. I rush him and take a swing at his face. He jerks back, eyes widening in surprise. I don't get another shot at his face. His friends grab my arms and pin me back against the tree. The Wolf laughs.

“Where are you going to run now?”

He yanks up my sleeve and puts out his cigarette on my arm, right above the crook of my elbow. It's my first scar, and later, my first tattoo—a black hole, swirling stars swallowed inwards.

That day, I take my beating and go home with one eye swollen shut. The Wolf leaves Lena alone after that. Maybe it's because he got his revenge, and I got suitably punished.

But *I* don't forget.

The next year, at the end of summer, I go to the Blood Moon and strip off my T-shirt. The burn scar on my arm is still raw and red. I walk straight to the Wolf and I smash my face into his teeth. They cut into my forehead but break. He staggers back. I throw myself into him with all my strength.

I'm twelve, he's sixteen, about to turn seventeen. It's his last Blood Moon. I beat him until he slumps in my grip, and then I fight everyone who falls under my hand. I can't even see who I'm fighting because of the blood in my eyes. I fight and fight and fight, like a dog in a ring, a scream in my skull, until there's nobody left to fight.

That's how I become the Blood Wolf.

That year, nobody touches me or my sister. I'm finally safe—and more importantly, *Lena* is finally safe.

And then my father turns up.



# Born Desperate

## Zahara

EVERY MAN I EVER love ends up breaking my heart.

It's the dark curse within my life, the rotten core of all my pain.

My first love, like most little girls, I suppose, was my father. Everything about him captivated me as a child. His direct gaze, his dark beard, always perfectly groomed. The rich smell of his perfume, the fastidious care he took in his appearance. His voice, that deep boom, the authority with which he spoke and moved. Even when I didn't understand what he was saying, I loved to hear him speak. He took up space in my life like a heroic figure in a legend, half reality and half myth. I feared him a little; I loved him completely.

My father is the one who left the gaping wound inside my heart, the one I've been trying to fill ever since. He promised to love me and keep me safe; he would say this to me all the time when I was little. I would close my eyes and listen to the vibration of his voice as he spoke with his lips pressed to my curls.

“You're my world, my Zahara. Daddy will always love you and keep you safe.”

I still remember his words, the way they settled around me like armour. The armour is long gone, but the words remain inscribed on me like scars. All my oldest memories are of him:

the sound of his voice, the smoky grey of his eyes and the smell of his cologne. But growing up is realising that your parents are only ever just human.

And my father is just a man, after all. A liar like any other.

He promised he would love me and keep me safe—then he sent me away and let me get hurt. I've been getting hurt ever since. Sometimes, when he's angry at me, he says, "Why don't you tell me when you need help? All I want is to keep you safe."

But I never have the heart to tell him the truth.

*Because I'm not sure I still believe you can keep me safe.*

*Because I'm afraid that being around you will be more painful than being around the people who hurt me.*

*Because sometimes, you're the one who's hurting me.*

He's never realised how much he's hurt me because the pain he inflicts is death by a thousand cuts. Small wounds, inflicted over and over again.

It's every time he ever looked at me in annoyance, in anger, in disappointment. It's every time he compared me to my brother and told me I wasn't keeping up with Zachary. It's every time he told me he expected more from me when I was already doing the best I could. Every time he scolded me because I did something that would make our family look bad.

It's when he sent me away to France for my education, or later, when he sent me to Spearcrest to get my own brother to

spy on me. It's every summer holiday I spent dying in the harrowing desert of his silence.

My father was the first man to break my heart, and he's been breaking it every day since. You'd think I'd be used to heartbreak by now.

If only.



FOR MY FINAL YEAR of university, I'm going to cut down on partying, pass my degree with first-class honours and not get my heart broken.

I make this vow publicly, at the last party of the summer, in front of all my friends. And when I say friends, I mean my peers, my fellow London socialites. A group of bright young people I know by default of who my parents are but never grew close to. Most of them went to the same British private schools, but I was exiled in France until I was sixteen. An adolescence of inside jokes and shared experiences keeps me separate from everyone else.

That's how I end up being the loneliest socialite in London.

"Zahara Blackwood, cutting down on partying?" someone says when I make my vow. "I would bet every acre of my father's lands you wouldn't last a month."

“Don’t worry, darling,” the daughter of a media mogul giggles, slinging a slender arm around my waist. “You’re still going to get your first-class honours. You probably won’t even need to study for it. You Blackwoods are just born clever.”

My brother was born clever. *I* was born desperate to keep up with him.

I don’t say this out loud. Someone says what everyone else is thinking anyway.

“And even if you don’t, just get Daddy to pay for the degree you want.”

Nobody says anything about whether or not I’ll keep my vow of not getting my heart broken. They all follow social media and gossip news. Everybody in London knows my heart is a bruised fruit for men to bite and toss around.

I’m a self-fulfilling prophecy of pain, stuck in an endless loop of satiation and starvation. I try to eat so I’m not hungry, and every morsel leaves me starving because I’m the one who’s consumed every time.



MAYBE THAT’S WHY I end up at the bar. I’m finishing a glass of red wine—my last of the night, I tell myself. It’s that

point in the night when the partying gets a little too messy for me, and the loneliness sets in.

This is the point at every party where I remember I don't even enjoy being drunk, and I don't feel safe with anyone there, and the bar is too loud and dim and suffocating, and I would much rather be at home, curled up in my pyjamas with a book and a slice of cake and a silky latte.

A voice interrupts my thoughts.

"I would ask what a beautiful girl like you is doing alone in a bar like this," the voice says as a figure sidles up to me, "but I'm guessing that's a question you've heard many times before."

The man has a slight regional accent but excellent elocution. A former private school boy. I turn to look at him. I'm not so drunk that I would let just anyone approach me at a bar. I never am.

He's dressed well and has a distinguished air about him. I can tell he's wealthy from the cut of his clothes, the way he carries himself. There's a signet ring on his pinky.

"You'd be surprised," I tell him.

He wants me. I can tell by the nervous gesture with which he slicks back his greying hair. He seems too old to be in this particular Soho bar at this particular time of night, but so what? And so what if he's old enough to be my father? I'm mature beyond my years, and I've long realised age in men doesn't correlate with maturity or intelligence.

And is it wrong for him to look at me, to want me when I'm so clearly younger than him? Men are always so ambitious with their desires. Wanting what they can easily have is never as fun to them—they want to be reaching for the top shelf. Desire in women is rooted in the heart—desire in men is rooted in their ego.

He draws closer to me, resting his elbows on the bar, his shoulder brushing against mine. I can smell his cologne—Sauvage by Dior, the middle-aged man's olfactory uniform.

"I'm sure that's not true," he says, testing the waters. "A girl like you. Men must be throwing themselves at your feet."

Should I do this? I weigh my options idly. On one hand, I've just made a vow to not get my heart broken. On the other, this man doesn't look like I could ever like him enough to let him break my heart. On one hand, I've promised myself I would focus on my studies this year. On the other, the academic year doesn't start until next week.

On one hand, I don't want this man.

On the other, I don't want to go back to my empty apartment to lie awake all night with my loneliness gnawing at me.

I give him my most wistful smile. "If only." I sigh and lean ever so slightly into him. "The truth is that I never get approached." I sweeten my smile with a dreamy sigh. "You're the first one, actually."

It's my best line, my go-to lie. It serves the dual purpose of making me sound more attainable and making him feel

superior to other men. As usual, it works like a charm.

His entire body language changes. His chest puffs with confidence, his eyes crinkle into a smile, his hand rests lightly on the small of my back. He leans a little closer. “That’s the saddest thing I’ve heard that still made me feel happy.”

“I’m a sad girl,” I tell him.

It’s the first truthful thing I tell him. And of course, it’s the first thing he doesn’t believe.



# Thorny Thing

## Zahara

“YOU’RE TOO YOUNG AND beautiful to be sad.”

His face is plain, pleasant but not striking. He’s well-groomed, with a full head of hair still and a neatly trimmed beard. His designer glasses lend him an air of distinction. If I scrunch my eyes up almost closed, I could maybe pretend he’s my favourite university professor, the one I’ve had a crush on for years.

“I’m Zahara,” I tell him, giving him my hand.

He takes it and holds it in his, his fingers playing with the gold bracelets around my wrist.

“James.” He smiles and gestures the bartender over. He orders two whiskies (of course) and turns so that he’s fully facing me. “James Verma. What brings you to London, Zahara, aside from making my evening more interesting?”

I always avoid telling men I’m a student if I can. Some men see it as a raging red flag; they flinch like they’ve been caught in a trap. Other men see it as an indication of malleability, a carte blanche to behave however they want because you’re probably too young and naive to have any power in the relationship.

“I’m a historian,” I tell him.

“A historian?” He licks his lips. “Are you certain?” His eyes swipe down the length of me, a gaze like a frisk. He looks at

the loose satin of my dress, my legs, my vertiginous heels in caramel patent leather. “You’re not exactly what one would imagine when picturing a historian.”

Another man who doesn’t think a woman can be beautiful and well-dressed and still be intelligent or scholarly.

I mask my annoyance with mild amusement. “You don’t believe me?”

He laughs. “No. I believe you—but I don’t believe any historian should ever be this attractive. And I can say that. I’m a historian too... of sorts.”

It’s my turn to be dubious. “Is that so?”

“I’m an art collector,” he says. “And I’m on the board for the Lady Catherine Gallery. So, not quite a historian, but I know a thing or two.”

“A lover of art,” I say with a nod of appreciation. We might actually have something in common. “A lover of art, and, presumably, you’re...” I glance down at his ringless fingers. “Not available?” I finish in my sweetest, huskiest tone.

I’ll let him have me, but I won’t sleep with a married man.

“I’m divorced,” he says quickly—maybe even a little too quickly. “Maybe I should have said that first. It’s just not the most romantic thing to tell a woman.” He smiles with the confidence of a man who thinks he’s the first one to have figured women out. “Doesn’t every woman want to feel like she’s in a romantic comedy, after all?”

James Verma has the charisma and flirtation skills of a shy weasel, but I've wasted too much of my time on him to leave this bar alone. Better give him a nudge in the right direction.

“I think women just want a happy ending,” I tell him.

It works like a charm. He leans forward, enveloping me in the scent of his cologne, and I have to block my breathing. Sauvage by Dior comes with too many bad memories of other middle-aged men who were supposedly divorced, and I don't want to think about them.

“Oh?” he breathes in my ear. “What kind of happy ending?”

I take a horrible sip of my untouched whisky and pick up my purse from the bar. “Why don't you show me?”



BACK IN THE LAMPLIGHT of his hotel suite, after he's clumsily kicked off his trousers and half-thrown me onto the bed, I find out once again that happy endings are for men only.

To be fair to him, he does give it a valiant go. He kisses at my neck and tongues the inside of my mouth, but the taste of whisky on his breath makes me want to cringe. He paws at my breasts and licks between my legs for a few minutes, groans, “Fuck, you're so gorgeous, I can't wait—” and then scrambles

around putting on a condom before pushing inside me with a strangled groan.

If I was to guess, I'd say he's not done this in a while.

If I was to guess, I'd say he's never personally witnessed a real female orgasm in his life. Then again, most men haven't. At least it makes it easy for me to give him the little performance all men need to soothe their ego, that boost to push them over the finishing line. I moan, soft at first, then louder. I clench my thighs around his hips with a big gasp and then, for my flourish, I look up into his eyes and lie.

“God, you feel so good.”

He comes with a yelp and falls on top of me like an exhausted seal. I let him lie for a second, and then he flops to the side and rolls upright to make the awkward journey to discard his used condom in the hotel bathroom.

I lie on my side on the bed, sore and hollow, pulling the sheet over me to cover myself. At least I'm not alone, I tell myself. At least I'm not alone.

Even though there's nobody here to see me, I feel as if a hundred eyes are watching me, a hundred heads shaking in disappointment and disdain.

None of them hold more disappointment and disdain than I hold for myself.



WHEN JAMES COMES BACK into the hotel room, he has the decency to slide into bed next to me and take me into his arms, nuzzling my shoulder.

“That was amazing,” he mutters. “You’re the perfect girl, you know that?”

I stare into the hotel room, distracting myself with the decor. Lilies in a green glass vase. Art Deco crown moulding. Mounted slip shades that look like moths with glowing wings. Nothing I would have personally chosen. I have the horrible urge to cry, but I don’t.

*I’m not the perfect girl, I want to say. I’m a thorny rose nobody wants to hold.*

The thought crawls through me, self-pitying and pathetic.

With it comes an unwanted memory. A memory that haunts me like a wailing ghost, and always finds me in my most pathetic moments.

The memory goes something like this.

Blank black eyes and the butt of a cigarette glowing red. A rainy night in London, a sky like ink, blotted with clouds. The Thames churning in the distance and the dull pulse of

nightclub music. A big hand with tattooed fingers holding up my Chanel umbrella.

Sixteen-year-old me doing a twirl in a small sparkly dress. “Do I look good?” I ask, like Snow White’s stepmother pestering her mirror.

Like the mirror, no reaction. A pale face like a cold, empty surface. A shrug. A monosyllabic answer. “Sure.”

A spark of annoyance lighting a fuse inside me. It burns all the way to my heart, setting the hurt alight like kindling catching fire.

“*Sure?*” I repeat, incapable of stopping myself. “You’re saying I’m not beautiful?”

The blank, obsidian eyes. The unsmiling mouth, with a cut in the bottom lip like an accessory, like an encrusted garnet.

“Sure you’re beautiful.” A moment of silence. Then he adds, “Like a rose.”

A moment of self-satisfaction to soothe the annoyance. Finally. Even grudging praise can seem like a feast to a starving heart.

“Really?” I throw my hair over my shoulder, letting the fragrant curls cascade. “Like a rose?”

“Yea.” His voice is deep and without inflexion. “Thorns all over.”

His words haunt me like an invisible wound.

Because he wasn't trying to be cruel or mocking or flirtatious. He said it, simply, because it was true. He said it all the time, in that year when my brother made him into my warden-bodyguard. "Thorny thing, your sister," he would tell my brother after we'd argued or I'd shoved him or called him names or yelled at him or thrown his phone at the ground or tried to call the police on him.

Thorny, because thorns are painful but not deadly, an irritating inconvenience designed to keep others away. Nothing more.

Iakov Kavinski might be as big and dumb as a pile of rocks, and he might be nothing more than a glorified guard dog for my brother to order around, but during the year he spent in my life, he never once lied to me.

And for that, I hate him more than every liar I've ever met.



# Personal Business

## **Iakov**

I WAKE UP WITH blood on my hands.

Again.

My face is pressed against a hard surface. I sit up with a groan. I fell asleep sitting on my apartment floor, head on the coffee table. The surface is covered with empty coffee cups, takeaway boxes and vodka bottles.

A headache pounds through my skull. Red hammer crashing from temple to temple. I grab the plastic water bottle propped on the floor by the table. I have no idea how long it's been there. I down it in three gulps.

I stand up, groaning with each movement of my sore muscles. I didn't need to go that hard last night. I only did it because I knew there was no point going home. I don't sleep at the best of times, but last night would have been worse than usual. Adrenaline and triumph were pumping through me like the kind of drug that brings you crazy high and crashes you back down twice as hard.

It's not the kind of rush I get often.

Most of the time, when I get my hands bloody, it's for work, because my father told me to. Most of the time, when I hurt someone, it's some anonymous face for some anonymous reason. I don't ask questions; my father's not the kind of man

who likes explaining himself. I learned that lesson on the back of his hand and the heel of his boot.

Now, I just do what I'm told and slink back home like the servile dog I am, to lick my wounds and burn alive in the hellfire of insomnia.

Anton says I can't sleep because of the guilt. He says I need to do what he does, what all my father's lackeys do.

“You go to church, you pray, you ask for forgiveness. Then the guilt is gone—clean hands, clean mind. You sleep. You start again.”

I don't know if there's a god or not, and if there is one, I don't know if he can forgive us that easily. That's not the reason I don't go to church. The reason I don't need my guilt absolved is that I don't feel guilty.

I feel nothing at all.

That's what really keeps me awake at night. The nothing. The gaping, black void, with my death at the centre like the singularity of a black hole and the distant whispers of a dead old woman.

Except last night. Last night, for the first time in a long time, I felt something.

Hope.

It's an electrifying sensation, and it makes me sick as fuck, even this morning. I don't know how people live like this. I heave myself to my feet and run to the bathroom and throw up all over the toilet seat. Slumping back against the wall with a

grunt of exhaustion, I pull out the folded piece of paper from my pocket and hold it tight in my fist.

*Worth it.*



THIS PIECE OF PAPER is the most expensive thing I own now. It cost me more time, money and favours than anything else I've ever earned.

Last night, when I went to pick it up, in a small park in Tverskoy District, the fucker in the suit pulled it out of my reach at the last minute.

“You know how much this is worth?” Danyl Stepanovich asked me, holding the folded scrap of paper between two fingers.

The night was quiet, and the moon was a distant white cigarette burn in the sky.

“Three years, almost a million roubles and a dead body,” I answered.

He looked at me, full of silent bile. “Your father doesn't like people sniffing around his personal business.”

I clenched my fists. The fucker turned up without security because he can't even trust his own people. He's more than twice my age and so wealthy he probably pisses roubles, but

that doesn't matter. What matters is that I could crush him like an egg in my fist and watch the goo of him ooze from my fingers.

And I've been wanting to crush him in my fist for a long time now.

"Think of it as sniffing around *my* personal business," I tell him instead.

It's the last chance I'm giving him. But he hesitates again.

"If Pavel finds out I gave you this information, he'll have my head on a platter."

"He won't find out."

There are two kinds of people in this world. People who strike a bargain, and when you meet your end of the deal, pay up as was agreed.

Then, there are those who strike a bargain, and when you meet your end, they try to get more out of you because they figure you want the payout too much to say no.

Danyl Stepanovich, my father's close business partner and a former bent cop, is the second kind.

Whatever price he named, it would never be enough. He knows how much I want what he has. He could ask me for a million, and when I gave it to him, ask for a million and one.

But I was out of millions and out of patience.

So I threw a punch at his face that rocked him clean off the ground. I dropped a knee into the mush of his big gut, and I

picked him up by the collar.

“I paid up,” I told him. “Your turn.”

He gave me the piece of paper, then I still beat the shit out of him. Why not, right? He had it coming, and the bloodlust was rushing through me like a primal scream. I beat him like it didn't even register, like my body was empty machinery.

After a while, the muscles in my back and arms started aching and I stopped. I shoved the piece of paper into my pocket and left. I didn't even look back at the groaning pile of Danyl Stepanovich.

My bike ride through Moscow felt like the streaking of a comet in the sky. Years of searching, and I finally had a lead. It was a win I desperately needed.

I stopped at a bar near my apartment building and finally opened the piece of paper. It was only a few lines long. The name of a high school and an address in St Petersburg.

The last known trace of my sister, Lena.



THE DAY MY FATHER comes to get me, it's raining in Yalinka. It's late at night: I've just come home from a run and my mother is cooking stew and dumplings. Lena lies on the living room floor on an island of blankets and pillows,

drawing while the TV blares badly dubbed anime in the background.

There's a knock at the door unlike anything I've ever heard before, like someone is trying to break the door with each slam. I look up from the kitchen table, where I'm peeling potatoes for my mother's stew. She's frozen in place, her head turned towards the door.

"Who's that?" I ask.

"I don't know," she says. But her voice is shaking.

But my mother is always nervous around people. She always glances over her shoulder whenever we go to the supermarket. She keeps to herself, rarely leaves the house unless she's working, hates visitors and never leaves Yalinka even though she wasn't even born here.

"I'll go check," I tell her.

I put down the potatoes in their plastic net and go to the door. The potato peeler is still in my hand—an object like a small pointed knife with two long slits down the middle.

Before I can put my face to the peephole, another knock comes crashing down, so hard the wood of the door cracks under the force of it. I jump but force myself to take a step forward, the peeler clutched in my sweaty palm.

"Yasha?" Lena's voice squeaks.

I turn to see her little head poking from the living room doorway.

“Lena. Go to Mama.”

She nods and scuttles to the kitchen. I turn back to the door and put my face against it to look through the peephole.

In time to see a man raise what looks like a thick black pipe. Later, I learn it's not a pipe. It's a battering ram.

I only have time to take one step back before the battering ram slams into the door handle. A deafening crash, the crack of splintering wood. The door flies back and smashes into my face. My nose crunches. The sudden gush of blood.

I fall back against the wall and blink as men pour into our tiny corridor. There's the man with the battering ram, then two men in black coats, their hands in their pockets. Finally, two stocky men with soulless black eyes. At first, I assume they're brothers.

Then they both look at me, and I can tell from their eyes they are two very different men.

One gives me a curious look, emotionless and intrigued. The other stares at me, eyes moving up and down the length of me. His eyes are empty, his eyelids heavy. He looks at the blood pouring from my nose, and his lip curls with distaste, as if my injury is offensive to him.

He turns and walks away, two men following him into the kitchen, the rest standing in the corridor with their hands crossed in front of them like statues.

Picking myself up, I wipe my nose with my sleeve and rush into the kitchen. Mama stands by the cooker, squeezing Lena



in her arms. I've seen Mama look afraid before, but never like this. Her lips are white, her eyes huge. She looks like a little girl—like Lena. She looks like she's about to cry.

But she doesn't.

“Daniela.”

It's the man with the empty eyes who speaks. He's the owner of all the other men, I can tell. He pulls a chair out from under the rickety dining table, where the potatoes lie abandoned. Setting the chair in the middle of the kitchen, he sits down and lights a cigarette.

“Mr Kavinski,” my mother says in an unsteady voice.

Growing up, there's always been a blank father-shaped hole in my life that I never questioned. Kids at school have fathers, my friend Maksym has a father. Even Lena has a father—not a great one, but he visits once every couple of months and brings apologetic packets of sweets and awkwardly pats Lena's head while she tells him about school.

If I have a father, I figure, Mama will tell me about it. But she never speaks of one, just like she never speaks about her life before she moved to Yalinka.

Still, it doesn't occur to me who this man might be. I stare at him as he stares at my mother. His face is ugly, his skin too loose for his face, his bones too thick. He looks like a thug in a suit and coat. His cigarette looks too small in his big rough hand. The stench of it fills the kitchen, chasing away the comforting smell of the stew.

“Who’s this?” the man asks, jabbing his chin at Lena.

I step forward. My skin crawls like it’s full of electricity. I don’t want the man to go anywhere near Lena. I want him gone from my house.

I think about the Blood Moon, how good it felt to smash my skull in the Wolf’s face. But this is different. For the first time in my life, I have the urge to hurt the man *irrevocably*. Not to beat him, but to *destroy* him, make him into a pile of soggy flesh and pulverised bones.

My first real surge of bloodlust.

It’s been dormant inside me all these years—this man brings it flaring to life.

It settles inside me to stay, settles right next to its cold, dark neighbour. The red of bloodlust and the black of death.

“This is my daughter,” Mama says.

She keeps her eyes on the man. Her cheeks are scarlet, her lips tremble. But she doesn’t cry.

“Got yourself a man, Daniela?” the man asks.

“No.”

“I know,” the man says. He stands up and looks around. “I know everything about your shitty little life, Daniela. Your shitty jobs. Your shitty ex-boyfriend. Your little Lena. *Him*.”

His eyes settle on me. There’s no expression on his face, only the faint curl of distaste in his mouth.

“Clean your face up, boy,” he says. “You look a fucking mess.”

I look at him and do nothing.

“This is how you raised my son, Dani?” the man asks, still looking at me. “He looks like an animal.”

“Please,” my mother says, her voice breaking. “Please, Mr Kavinski. *Please* don’t do this.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

Now the man turns back to my mother. We can all tell he’ll be the only one speaking from here on out.

“I’ve not come to hurt you, Dani. I’ve come to take what’s mine, what you *took* from me. I know you won’t like it, but I’ve not come to bargain with you. You want to keep living this little life, you go ahead. I don’t give a fuck about you, Daniela, I never have, and I never will. You’ll never be anything more than the girl who cleans up after me, whether you work for me or not. You left, alright—so you left. I was never going to marry you, was I? Men like me don’t marry cheap little whores like you. But you didn’t leave empty-handed, and that makes you a thief. You *stole* from me. And you know what I do to thieves—you know how merciful I’m being. I’ve just come to take back what’s mine. That’s it. The boy comes with me; you never see me again. See? I’m not a monster after all.”

He turns and walks out of the kitchen as if his business here is done. On his way out, he snaps his fingers in my face.

“You. Come.”

Then I make the biggest mistake of my life.

I fight him.

Your Lancelot

## **Zahara**

MY FINAL YEAR AT university begins, and against all the odds, things start looking up.

St Jude's University might be my favourite place in the whole world. It's one of the oldest universities in London and shares a campus with St Jude's Museum, a renovated castle that's hundreds of years old sitting on the crest of a hill overlooking Bower Park.

But my favourite thing about St Jude isn't the castle, or the campus, or the old bridge, or the enormous oaks in the castle grounds. It's not the main hall with its wrought-iron chandeliers, and it's not the big lecture hall with its velvet seats and enormous portraits, or the observatory to the south of the campus. It's not even the museum, with its world-class collection of artefacts from the Middle Ages.

My favourite thing about St Jude's is Professor Sterling.

Iain Sterling is a history professor at St Jude's University. When I started in my first year, it was to study politics and history—but it's thanks to Professor Sterling I ended up heavily prioritising my history units, and now I generally consider myself a history student.

Just another way I'm disappointing my father, but who's counting?

I know it's going to be a problem down the line. My parents are paying for my studies, and as much as they would never overtly try to control my future, they're not funding me out of the kindness of their hearts. Since Zachary abandoned the family business and refused to follow them into politics, my parents have made it clear they expect me to be their backup successor.

But I've spent the past two years falling in love with history—especially the parts of history that are so long ago they begin to merge with folklore and myth. And if there's one lesson I've learned from studying history, it's that victors in politics are few and far between. And even then, those odds are drastically reduced the moment you consider women in politics.

I was a failure all through my adolescence. I refuse to grow up and keep failing in adulthood.

And anyway, who cares if I disappoint my parents again?

They must be getting used to it by now.



IT'S THE FIRST DAY of the autumn term, and I'm standing in the atrium of the history building, next to the statue of Tacitus, killing time between lectures.

“Well, Zahara. I’m told I’m going to be your dissertation supervisor this year.” A warm, masculine voice wraps around me like an embrace. “It would seem I can never escape your propensity for run-on sentences and comma splices.”

I turn, laughing in surprise.

Professor Sterling is crossing the atrium, a pile of books wedged under one arm. His light brown hair, grey at the temples and the back, is as tangled as ever, and the sleeves of his crisp white shirt are rolled back. His smile is fond, and he pushes his wire-framed glasses back up on his nose with a thumb.

There’s a lightness in my stomach as he approaches me. His smile feels as if it exists only for me. I don’t know what love is supposed to feel like, but it can’t feel much different from this, can it?

“For a doctor of post-medieval history,” I answer him, “you do seem to forget that writing wasn’t always shackled by so many rules, professor.”

“Dear lord,” Professor Sterling says with a sigh. “Not another year of grammar being sacrificed at the altar of style again.”

But his smile remains warm as he stops next to me. He’s not tall, only a few inches taller than me, but his confidence is all in the brilliance of his mind, the charm of his glasses, his woollen waistcoats, his worn brown oxfords.



“If you’d prefer to read dry, uninspired essays all year,” I say with a little smirk, “by all means, swap me in for someone else. Professor Cedillo is a big fan of my writing, I’m sure she would be happy to adopt me.”

His smile stretches. “Shush now, nobody’s adopting you. You’re *my* little orphan.”

We’re both standing at the corner of the central staircase, in the shadow of Tacitus. We’re not close enough to touch, but close enough that I can smell the coffee on his breath, see the titles of the books wedged under his arm, the way his perfectly trimmed moustache and beard frame the pink shape of his lips.

I’m looking at him, and he’s looking at me. I’m wearing the type of outfit I normally wear to class: a high-neck black top, a plaid skirt, Prada loafers. My coat is folded over my arms, and my hair, which I’m currently wearing in natural curls, is gathered back in a big silk scrunchie.

I look like my normal self, nothing out of the ordinary. Not dressed up like I would be if I was going to a party or on a date. And yet Professor Sterling looks at me like I’m anything but normal. His gaze lingers on me like I deserve all of his attention.

I know what I feel for Professor Sterling. And it’s not the way I should feel about my history professor and dissertation tutor. I just don’t know how *he* feels about *me*.

How can you tell the difference between a kindly professor who’s taken a shine to a student and a man who’s falling in love with a woman?

Does it even matter?

Whatever this thing is we have between us, I cherish it too much to lose it.

I smile. “You’ll see, professor. It won’t be so bad to have me under your wing. I’ll be the loveliest student you ever supervised.”

“I don’t doubt that for one moment.” He checks his watch and gives me a wink. “And now I’m running late for my next lecture. See you later, little historian.”

He strides away, and I wave him off. I stare at him until he disappears down a long corridor, and then I sigh long and deep, like a schoolgirl with a terrible crush.

Which is, let’s be honest, exactly what I am.



MY GOOD MOOD BUOYS me through the day, carrying me on a cloud until I get home.

My apartment is in a gorgeous Georgian building with a white façade and rectangular windows. My apartment, on the fifth floor, is large and airy. I chose it for its vintage tiles, its high ceilings and its dentil cornices because nothing makes me feel better than pretending I live in a historical romance, where

heroines don't get fucked in hotels and broken up with via texts.

I check my letterbox before I make my way up. A letter from St Jude's—my reading list for this semester—and a postcard from Zach. He sends me one almost every week with little updates about Theo and him. I don't respond to them, but I collect them in a little box in the drawer of my bedside table.

A third letter makes me pause. It's in a cream envelope of stiff paper, my name written by hand in a clean cursive across the front. There's no address—neither mine at the front of the envelope nor a return address at the back. Just my name.

Heart sinking, I open the envelope. Inside is a short letter on the same high-quality cream paper, also hand-written. My eyes move across the lines, my stomach squirming as I read.

*'Darling Zahara,*

*I hope you had a wonderful summer.*

*I have missed you sorely.*

*I adore and crave you still.*

*Forever yours,*

*Your lover from afar,*

*Your Lancelot.'*

A sickening sensation makes my insides clench. I look around; there's a concierge office, but it's closed and looks empty. So is the lobby. Outside the door, the street is quiet,

empty but for a couple of people walking their dogs. There's nobody around, but I feel like I'm being watched.

This isn't the first time I've received one of these notes. In my first year of university, I used to receive them all the time. It was part of the reason why my friends and I decided to move out of the house we shared in our first year. Ever since I've moved here in Knightsbridge, I've been careful not to give my address to anybody. Apart from the university, only Zach and my best friends, Rhiannon and Sanvi, know where I live.

My skin crawls. I throw the letter with its envelope in the lobby bin and run to my flat, locking the door behind me as soon as I get in.

*Not again, I keep thinking. Please. Not this again.*

I've always wanted to be loved. Sometimes, I want it so bad I ache from the want of it. But this isn't love. Whoever they are, they're not soothing the pain inside me. These letters never once made me feel loved.

They just make me afraid.

Afraid, alone, and unsafe.

Dead End

## Iakov

THE NAME AND ADDRESS of the St Petersburg Lyceum No237 cost me three years, almost a million roubles, a broken arm, enough unsavoury favours to rival a week in my father's schedule and a dead body.

A large chunk of that cost was just for the mistakes I made along the way. And I made many. Working for my father didn't teach me anything aside from how to obey like a dog. My private education means I speak English like a native and understand basic trigonometry but somehow that's never been much help after I left Spearcrest Academy.

I made mistakes and I made them hard. The recoil on each mistake cracked me in the face and sent me on my arse.

And it wasn't just mistakes I was busy making in those three years. A lot of that time was spent doing favours for favours in return, building a network of favours like a spider's web. Petty crooks, bent cops, low-level *prestupnaya* and low-ranking politicians—exactly the kind of fuckers I despised I ended up having to rely on the most.

They led me to Danyl, after all. And Danyl led me to Lena.

And Lena is the only thing I give a shit about.

So those three years weren't a waste. And I did learn a lot. I learned more in those years than I did in all my years at

Spearcrest, and I learned more from the crooked and the corrupt than I did from all my fancy professors.

I learned that nothing in life is free, that everything is work, and that my fists will get me further than my brain. I learned that I can't rely on my charm and good looks, like my aristocratic friend Sev Montcroix, and I can't rely on my wit and words like my best friend the lord-philosopher Zach Blackwood. But I have two good fists and a low pain tolerance, and those are lucrative enough.

Violence, time and money get me the name and address of the St Petersburg Lyceum No237.

But no further.



I WALK OUT OF the Lyceum into the crisp cold blue of a September afternoon. The air is hard in the unblinking sun. I light a cigarette and glance down the steps leading to the door. At the bottom, a small girl in a dark school uniform stands holding her school bag. She cranes her head back, looking at me with wide eyes.

I look at her and try to picture Lena in the same school uniform.

But Lena was never here. That's what the headmaster told me. He wasn't lying—I could tell. A tall, austere man, with intelligent eyes and a direct, calm manner of speaking. He reminded me of my old headmaster at Spearcrest, Mr Ambrose. A mix of authority and empathy.

The headmaster of Lyceum No237 looked genuinely sad when I told him as much of the truth as I could. That I had been taken away from my little sister when I was twelve and she was ten, and I was trying to find out what happened to her since. He checked her name on his system in front of me. He even tried different spellings and different years to the ones I told him.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “I don't think your little sister was here, son. I wish I could help you.”

It was surprising to hear. When he first saw me waiting in the reception, his eyes narrowed. He looked at my leather jacket and mud-splattered boots and my tattoos and bruised knuckles and shaved head. He probably looked at me and saw nothing but a thug. That's what everybody else sees.

“Do you have pictures, school photos?” I asked him.

“I can't let you look at those.” He sighed. “You understand, don't you? For the protection and privacy of my students. You'd need to contact the police if you wanted to search through those.” He took off his glasses and sighed. “Go to the police, son. If you do this properly, I'll do everything I can to help you find your sister.”



I nodded and thanked him. There was no point explaining to him that I could never go to the police. That my father has more bent cops in his pockets than a *pakhan*. That he would probably rather kill Lena than let me find her. How could this man possibly understand?

This man couldn't know that all of this was my fault. *I* was the one who fought my father when he came to get me, *I* was the one who told him I would rather die than obey him. I forced the hand of a man who *always* gets what he wants. In my father's eyes, he had no choice but to take away my mother and sister, to hide them somewhere I would never find them.

"You obey, they stay alive and well," he said to me. "Disobey me, even one time, and you'll never see them again."

I found out then how dangerous it is to fight my father.

And even now, when I finally thought I outsmarted him, he's still a step ahead of me.

I take a drag of my cigarette and let my head fall back as I exhale into the blue sky.

Fuck.

All that work, all that money. All those favours. All those split lips and broken bones and black eyes. All those sins tarnishing my conscience. All for nothing.

A long fucking road to a dead-fucking-end.

I finish my cigarette and look back down at the schoolgirl. She looks the same age Lena was when I last saw her. Did Lena come here, or was Danyl Stepanovich lying like the crooked piece of shit he is?

I try again to picture Lena in the uniform.

My face breaks into a hollow smile as I mentally answer my own question. The girl takes a step back, startled by my sudden smile, and looks fearfully around.

The truth is that I can't picture Lena at all. I haven't been able to for years now. Lena has become scar tissue in my memories: I know she's there, a badly healed wound, but there's nothing more to see than the space where I was hurt. I can't picture Lena's eyes or face or her smile. It's been ten years since I last saw her, but it feels like it was a lifetime ago.

"Stay in school," I tell the girl on my way down the steps.

I flick away my cigarette butt and shove my hands in my pockets. The girl gives me a look of disgust.

"Littering is bad," she tells me in Russian.

"I'm a bad person."

She says nothing, and I walk away with a grim laugh.



WHEN NOTHING FEELS GOOD and everything feels like you're drowning, there's nothing to do but surrender to the abyss.

Times like these, I think of the black lake in Yalinka, and the old woman who drowned there. Sometimes, I think I can even hear her voice, calling me to her. I think about her cardigan pockets full of stones and about how peaceful it must have been to be dragged down into the indifferent darkness of the water.

But I don't deserve peace.

I deserve to suffer.



I MAKE MY WAY back to Moscow, driving so fast the world becomes a blur around me. My motorbike streaks between the cars, and every time I swerve at the last minute, I'm just denying myself the kind embrace of death. That night, I go to the seediest bars and I drink until I can't speak and I fight until I can't move.

It's the only thing I'm good for.

I spend a night on a street and when a passerby tries to help me, I throw up on his shoes. He lets out a cry of disgust and a stream of insults. I deserve every one of them. In my pocket,

my phone buzzes with calls and messages, but I ignore them all.

I don't know if I make my way home or if wolves drag me there. The only thing I remember is cold concrete and the burn of alcohol and the acid smell of vomit. Mostly, I dream.

I dream of Yalinka and the cold black lake and the dead woman. I dream of the Blood Moon, and of my skull getting smashed into a kitchen table and the panicked wails of a scared little girl. And I dream of a girl who's nothing at all like my sister, a delicate girl with long curls and sad brown eyes and a shining dress. The only good dream I ever have, the girl in gold, but every time I try to touch her, she vanishes like mist.

# Pitiful Nymph

## Zahara

I'M ELEVEN YEARS OLD, it's the night of my parents' famous summer party. I'm on the central balcony, chin propped on my hands, watching the party in the garden below.

I'm not supposed to be up past eleven, and my parents don't like me being around the guests once they start drinking a little more heavily after dinner.

But I've snuck out of my bedroom and tiptoed onto the balcony, to watch the guests with envy. In particular, the women, who wear gorgeous dresses and elegant updos, and hold their champagne glasses with such effortless grace, and let men lean over them to light their cigarettes. I want so badly to be one of them. Maybe then my father will start noticing me again.

"Hello there, little nymph. I thought I saw you sneaking around up there."

I turn in a start to see a man in the open entrance to the balcony. I don't know him by name, but I recognise him. He's a friend of my father's, from his important job in the House of Lords. To me, he seems impossibly old—as old as my father—and I'm a little afraid to see him.

Afraid because, in my naivety, I think he might tell my father I'm still up.

He looks at me for a while, and I can tell something is off. Not quite what it should be. I don't realise what until he speaks again.

“You look just like your mother,” he whispers, drawing closer.

I smile; my mother is beautiful, and everybody loves her. But he steps closer. He touches my hair and runs his hand down my face.

It's not how my father touches me—how *anybody* touches me. I stand frozen, and my heart beats fast. My mouth remains open on the gasp I uttered earlier. He looks at my lips and pinches them lightly.

“Pretty girl,” he murmured.

A burst of laughter downstairs startles him. He steps back, wishes me goodnight and lurches away.

The following day, Mummy calls me downstairs. Next to her, on the entranceway table, is an enormous bouquet of white roses.

“Do you know what this is?” Mummy asks.

I shake my head no. She plucks a card from amongst the long green stems.

“This says it's from Reg.” She waits for me to react, and when I don't, she adds, “Uncle Reginald, I mean. Do you know why he's sending you these?”

My heart starts beating fast. I have a sinking feeling like I've done something wrong. I don't dare look at her or say anything. I wring my fingers and stare at the marble under my feet.

“Zahara.” Mummy sets the roses down and steps in front of me, taking my face gently in her hand. “My sweet. Has Uncle Reginald said something to you? Something... out of the ordinary or strange-sounding?”

I confess everything; my chest is too tight to contain the truth. I tell her about sneaking out onto the balcony, about Reginald finding me, calling me beautiful, touching my hair and lips. My mother listens quietly and when I'm done, she says, “Thank you for telling me, darling. I think it's best if we send those back, don't you?”

I nod.

I don't get in trouble, but I realise, later, that I messed up somehow. My father is the angriest I have ever seen him, so angry his voice shakes the air like thunder. He leaves that evening and I don't see him until the next morning. He won't look me in the eyes for a long time, and soon after, he tells me I'm going to boarding school in France.

I know I didn't do anything wrong—I still know this now. I also know that Uncle Reginald shouldn't have touched my hair and mouth and called me beautiful and sent me flowers.

I just can't help but feel as if it's my fault he had done all those things. If it wasn't, why else would my father send me as far away from him as he could?





“YOU COULD ASK WHOEVER owns your apartment building to set up security cameras in the atrium.”

“Or you could finally tell your father about it. The duke would probably hire a team of detectives to find the fucker and—I don’t know—probably have him bundled up and thrown into the Thames.”

“I could speak to *my* father if you don’t want to speak to yours.”

“Or! How about a bodyguard? You guys are rich enough for bodyguards, right?”

“A security detail isn’t the worst idea, Rhi, but the reality of them is nothing like the movies. They’re *so* awkward to have around. And Zaro would be sacrificing so much of her privacy.”

“What privacy? The creepy stalker knows where she lives now, you think *he’s* going to respect her privacy?”

“Maybe her boyfriend could move in with her?”

“Ew, that old man James Verma? Don’t call him her boyfriend. Anyway, doesn’t he have grandkids to babysit or something?”

“Ladies, I’m sitting right here.” I turn away from the window, outside of which the trees in the square are doing a sad dance in the wind and rain. “I can hear everything you’re saying?”

Around the table, my two best friends exchange a glance before turning back to me.

“Please. You’ve not listened to a thing we’ve said,” Rhiannon says, rolling her eyes.

“She’s having a tragic girl moment,” Sanvi says. “Deservedly so, of course.”

Rhiannon Byrne and Sanvi Dayal are my two best friends and the only people in the world who know about my stalker problem.

I’ve known Sanvi since I was a little girl. Her father is also in the House of Lords, and our parents have the same social circle. We both met Rhiannon in our first year of university, when we shared a house. Although it’s been a while since we’ve lived together, they still feel closer to me than sisters. We see each other every week without fail and as many times a week as we can.

It’s easy with Rhiannon. I study history and politics and she studies history of art, so our lectures and seminars are generally in the same building. But Sanvi, a true genius with her mathematical physics degree, is a bit more elusive.

Still, all I needed was to tell them I received a new letter. We settled on a time and a place for a meeting within five minutes

of me texting them.

This place isn't the nicest restaurant in London, but it's the perfect place for meetings such as these. It's rustic and a little chaotic, but cozy. It's popular with students, so loud and busy, and the waiting staff are all students too, so nobody tries to hustle us out of our table once we're finished eating.

"I *was* listening," I say with a sigh. "Sorry. I was just thinking."

"Are you going to tell your dad or not?" Rhiannon asks, leaning over the table and crossing her arms. "You probably should. I'd tell my dad if something like this was happening to me."

"Your dad would probably turn up in London with a rifle and promptly get arrested," Sanvi says with a little laugh.

They look the opposite of each other, and they often remind me of a cartoon angel and devil. Sanvi the angel, with her delicate bone structure, her shiny smile and silk-smooth hair, and Rhiannon the devil, with her sparkling green eyes, flame-red hair and her boyish grin. Rhiannon is the one who comes up with crazy plans, and Sanvi is the one who comes up with the smart solutions.

"Well, yeah—that's true," Rhiannon concedes. "But Dai, be honest. Wouldn't *you* do the same if it was your daughter being stalked by a creepy pervert?"

"Technically, we don't know that he's a pervert, just that he's creepy," Sanvi points out.

“Tracking down a girl’s address and then sending her creepy messages is perverted.” Rhiannon grimaces. “Just because he hasn’t said anything sexual yet doesn’t make it *not* sexual. It’s always sexual with men that do shit like this.”

“How do you think he got my address?” I ask.

“He probably followed you back to your apartment,” Rhiannon says with a shudder. “Fucking weirdo.”

In her Irish accent, the word “fucking” turns to the sound “fook’n” and I adore it. There’s something about expletives in an Irish accent that’s just incredibly satisfying. I can’t help but laugh.

“Surely not. I’d be able to tell if someone was following me.” I look from Rhiannon to Sanvi. “Right? Don’t you think you’d be able to tell?”

Sanvi shakes her head with a sigh. A strand of her long black hair slides down from her shoulder like a satin ribbon, and she throws it back with a graceful movement. “I don’t know, Zaro. I feel like I would, but London is such a big place. And if this guy has been doing things like this for a while, then you’d be surprised how good they get at what they do. Better not ignore the threat. Better make a plan.”

“He’s *definitely* been doing this for a while!” Rhiannon says, nodding vigorously. “You know, this kind of behaviour is usually an escalation. And I’m scared it’s going to keep escalating.”

In my heart, I know she's right. But I know what she's trying to get at, and I finally address it.

"I'm not telling my father. Full stop. That's just not going to happen."

"Why, though?" Rhiannon lifts the thick rims of her glasses to rub the bridge of her nose. "I don't get it. Your dad's got more clout than a member of the royal family. He could probably sort it out with the snap of his fingers."

I rest my chin in my hands with a sigh. "It's complicated, Rhi, it's hard to explain. I can't tell him, I just can't. He's going to think... not that it's my fault, but—"

"But it's *not* your fault."

"No, I know, but..." I swallow, a lump forming in my throat. I don't know how to explain that even if my father doesn't blame me, it will still feel like my fault. "Because of the past, and I told you, I had to leave St Agnes when I was sixteen because of—well, what happened with Mr Perrin, and now this..."

Rhiannon and Sanvi stare at me. Rhiannon with her unruly hair (which she claims gives her the ability to see ghosts) and thick glasses, Sanvi with her concerned face and eyes like a storybook princess. I love them with all my heart, but right now, they're staring at me with the same look on their faces.

A look I can't stand and which feels all too familiar.

Pity.

# White Roses

## Zahara

THE FIRST PERSON TO ever give me that look of pity is the last person in this world I ever want pity from.

When I'm sixteen, after I'm forced to leave my all-girls school in France and go to Spearcrest Academy, my brother asks his best friend to look after me. I don't have a choice in the matter, and Zach makes it sound like it's not about me.

But I'm not stupid or naive, not even at sixteen. I know Zach doesn't trust me, that he would rather have his best friend spy on me. Just like our father, his expectations of me are at rock bottom.

Iakov Kavinski follows me like a towering black shadow, but he rarely speaks. I hate that more than anything else. For a while, I wonder if he likes me. He has this way of looking at me, like his eyes are reaching right through and seeing some part of me nobody else sees. And because he never speaks, I wonder if maybe he's nervous around me.

But I'm wrong.

I find out on a Friday night in the pounding heart of a London club. I'm wearing the tiniest dress, and my hair is long down to my waist. I know I'm beautiful; men can't keep their hands off me.

Iakov watches me from the bar, his eyes following me as I try to lose myself on the dancefloor, seeking a relief I can't

find. I'm dying to ask him what he really thinks, what he really feels, but I can't bring myself to.

I can't stand him. His height, his silence, his scars and bruises, that horrible buzz cut he insists on wearing. All the pain and silence of him. It hurts to look at him, and when he looks at me, it's as if my skin has been stripped from me.

I would never have dared to say anything if it wasn't for Erik Mattner.

Erik is in his early thirties. He's rich and tall and blond and he dominates the club's VIP lounge like a conqueror. He approaches me like a hunter who's set his sights on a particular prey. And, best of all, he doesn't back down when Iakov gets in his way and says, "She's sixteen."

"If she was, she wouldn't be here," Erik says, throwing me a wink. "Right, gorgeous?"

Later, outside the club, he invites me back to his hotel. I have no intention of going until Iakov puts his arm in Erik's way and grunts, "Not happening."

I don't want to go to Erik's hotel with him. No matter how helpless everyone assumes me to be, even *I* know it would be a reckless thing to do. But getting a reaction out of Iakov, in that moment, feels more important than keeping myself safe.

So I try to go back to Erik's hotel with him. Looking back, I fiercely regret it—one of my many regrets. Regrets on a string, a necklace of them to wear around my neck.

And anyway, it doesn't go well.



I get far more than I bargained for trying to get a reaction out of Iakov because he beats Erik half to death and tries to throw him into the Thames. It takes all my persuasion skills (and an attempt at a phone call to the police) to dissuade him.

Even then the victory is short-lived: Iakov drops Erik's unconscious body on the pavement, grabs me by the waist, slings me over his shoulder and bundles me into a cab.

He doesn't care how hard I fight him, he doesn't even flinch when I slap him. He's impassive during the entire ride back to Spearcrest, making no response to any of my insults and protests. When we arrive, he carries me into the girls' building and into my bedroom, where he unceremoniously dumps me on top of my bed.

He turns to go, and I can't bring myself to let him leave without trying to land the final blow.

"You're a fake and a liar. You think I don't know you want the same thing Erik does? You're so jealous it's pathetic."

Iakov stops in his tracks and turns slowly back to me. The surge of triumph is insane. I sit up on my bed to throw him a defiant smile.

"Jealous?" he says in a dull tone of surprise. "Of what?"

"Of me—of *everyone*. Of all the fun we're all having while you just stand there watching like a good dog because it's what my brother ordered you to do."

And then Iakov does the last thing I expect him to do. He laughs.

“You don’t fuck for fun, Kolyuchka. You fuck to self-harm.”

And when he speaks, it’s not amusement in his voice.

It’s pity.



THE PITY IN RHIANNON’S and Sanvi’s faces is different from Iakov’s. It still hurts, though nothing could ever hurt as much as Iakov’s words did that night.

“Listen to me, you little shit,” Rhiannon says to me in a fierce voice. “None of this is your fault. Just because it keeps happening doesn’t make it your fault.”

“No, I know,” I say, but my voice falters. I didn’t realise how much I needed to hear that until this very moment. I blink my stinging eyes and quickly reach for my glass, hoping the water will wash away the lump in my throat.

“Look, you don’t have to tell your father,” Sanvi adds, reaching across the table to rub my arm. “It’s alright. We’ve got you, Zaro. We’ll help you. Why don’t we try working this out together?” She smiles. “I’m sure the three of us can outsmart one creepy pervert.”

“I mean, we could always speak to the police?” Rhiannon says, tilting her head. “Or—do rich people have, like, special police that do their bidding?”

Sanvi and I grew up in the upper echelons of British society, but Rhiannon didn't. Rhiannon grew up in a small rural town in Northern Ireland. Her parents own a handful of dental practices, but you'd think she was a poor country bumpkin amongst princesses the way she speaks about our lives.

"I think you might be referring to police corruption," Sanvi says with a delicate smile. "Us Dayals try to stay away from that."

"The police are the last people I'd want to speak to," I add. "Speaking to them is the equivalent of holding a press conference with every gossip rag in the country. No, thank you."

"You don't even read those," Rhiannon says. "So what do you care?"

"Think about it this way, Rhi," Sanvi explains in a tone of infinite patience. "If everybody was speaking about you behind your back, even if you couldn't hear exactly what they were saying, it would still feel pretty horrible, right?"

"I wouldn't give a fuck," Rhiannon says.

And she's telling the truth. It's probably my favourite thing about Rhiannon, the aspect I admire and envy the most. Rhiannon doesn't care what anybody thinks about her, and that gives her more freedom than money could buy.

I try to learn from her, but I never once didn't care what someone thought of me.

Even the people I hate the most—their opinions still matter. I hate it, but the idea of someone looking down on me or mocking me or even just commenting on my life makes me feel like ripping my own skin off.

Sanvi seems to spot the melancholy train of my thoughts, so she speaks bracingly.

“Right. So we’re not going to tell your parents, and we’re not going to the police. We could take turns staying with you if you like.”

That doesn’t sound half-bad, but I’m suddenly reminded of being sixteen again, arriving in Spearcrest and finding out my brother set his best friend on my tail.

“No, no, it’s fine,” I say quickly. “It’s just notes, right? If I keep ignoring him, maybe he’ll stop.”

Rhiannon and Sanvi exchange a dubious look.

“I like the investigation idea,” Rhiannon says suddenly. “We could play the player. Find out who he is. Uno reverse, start stalking *him*. We send *him* creepy notes. Maybe some pubes and, I don’t know, chicken livers.”

“I like the bodyguard idea, too,” Sanvi says, fluttering her eyes. “I’d like to put that back on the table. The security company my father uses when we travel is so good, they have real talent there. Maybe we could shop around?”

“It sounds like *you’re* the one who wants a sexy bodyguard,” Rhiannon says with a smirk. “Going through a dry spell, Dai?”

Sanvi sighs. “Nobody warned me that studying physics would be the equivalent of joining a convent.”

Rhiannon’s smirk widens. “Well, if you’re desperate, there’s always Ronan Byrne. You know every time I go home, he steals my phone just so he can go through my photos? Remember that picture we took at Roam? The one where you’re wearing that green dress? He’s obsessed with it.”

“I’m not dating your brother, Rhi,” Sanvi says with a shudder. “Only desperate women date their friend’s brothers.”

“You sound pretty desperate to me,” Rhiannon mutters.

“You hate your brother anyway, why would you want me to date him?” And then, as if she’s trying to escape a lion by throwing me in its tracks, she adds, “If anyone should date your brother, it should be Zaro. She’s the one in desperate need of a boyfriend, not me.”

“I’m perfectly fine, thank you very much.”

Rhiannon’s eyebrow shoots up, and I know she’s about to bring up James, so I quickly add, “I’m focusing on my studies. As you both know, I’m trying to graduate with first-class honours.”

“Ah, don’t remind me!” Sanvi says, dropping her head into her arms. She sits up just as quickly and pulls a folder out of her bag. “Look at my schedule for the year. I have no idea how I’m going to pull this off.”

Rhiannon grabs the folder and rifles through the papers, eyes widening. “Jesus! How many hours do you have in one day,

Dai? Because it looks here like you have five hours of lectures, two hours of seminars, and—six, no eight—hours of studying... all on one Thursday?”

“Exactly,” says Sanvi. “It’s the only way I’ll be able to pull off a first-class mathematical physics degree.”

“Should’ve gone for a humanities degree,” Rhiannon says, passing Sanvi her schedules back and patting her back in sympathy.

“I wish I had,” sighs Sanvi.

“You can do this, Dai,” I tell her. “You’re literally the smartest person I know.”

“You mean aside from your brother,” Sanvi says with a little shy smile.

I give her a little smile and a wink. “No, including him. Don’t tell him I said that, though.”

We order a fudge sundae—Sanvi’s favourite—which we end up sharing between the three of us. And even though we’ve not solved anything, my heart already feels much lighter.

It always does when I’m around them. If only I could keep them always at my side. Then nothing bad could happen to me.



LATER, SANVI AND I share a cab home, dropping her off first. It's late. Knightsbridge is still and quiet, the wind gently ruffling the yellowing leaves high up in the trees. There's a spring in my step as I make my way into the building, and my good mood is boosted when I check my letterbox to find it blissfully empty.

And then immediately evaporates when I reach my door and slide the key in. It's already unlocked. I frown, staring down at the lock. I remember locking it, but I left so early and the day's been so long. Did I forget to lock it?

My heartbeat picks up, the flutter of it throbbing in my throat. I suddenly wish I had asked Sanvi to stay the night with me, or for the cab to wait a bit before driving off. More than anything, I wish I wasn't alone.

I push the door open. I can tell something's wrong even before I turn on the light.

My fingers grope for the switch and find it. The halo lights flicker along the length of the corridor. My heart sinks, and I clap a hand over my mouth.

The floor is covered with roses. White roses, in full bloom, with leafy stems. They stretch all along the corridor floor, disappearing through the doorway into the open-plan living room. I don't check to see how far they go, I don't check for the cream envelope I know awaits me somewhere in the flat.

I just turn, terror blaring through me like a siren, and I run.

Total Mindfuck



## Iakov

A CRASHING SOUND MAKES my entire flat shake. It slams me awake with car-crash brutality.

I roll onto my back on my living room floor and grunt.

For fuck's sake. Here goes the front door. *Again.*

Footsteps pound through the flat, sending shockwaves of pain through my skull.

A gruff voice speaks.

“Get up, patsan.”

Fucking *Anton.*

My father must need something big done to send his right-hand man. Seeing Anton Levinov is a special occasion, like Christmas or Easter. I crack an eye open. He's not alone either. Two potato-faced goons flank him. They've both got their hair shaved to the skin. Guess all us goons end up looking the same.

“You look like shit,” Anton says, throwing a look of disgust across me and my flat.

Bit of an exaggeration. The flat isn't tidy, but it's not dirty either. It just looks like what it is: a den for an insomniac animal. Full ashtrays, piles of video game cases, dirty clothes, empty food containers and coffee cups. My approximation of the foreign concept *home.*

“You came all the way here to give me a makeover, dedushka?” I ask, sitting up and propping my arms on my knees.

My voice is hoarse from sleeping and drinking and smoking, from throwing up and screaming silently in my nightmares.

“Can’t fix ugly,” Anton says, rolling his eyes.

He gestures at his goons to open the curtains. Daylight floods the room. Looks like it might be the afternoon, but I have no concept of what time or even what day it could be. I blink in the aggressive sunrays. Anton crosses the room to pick up my phone, which lies face down in a greasy pizza box.

“You’re not taking calls these days, huh?” Anton asks, grimacing as he wipes my phone clean and plugs it into the charger near the TV.

“What for?” I ask.

“Work, patsan. What, you think you’re above it now?”

“I’m taking a break.”

“That’s not for you to decide,” Anton says, crossing his arms over his chest.

He sort of looks like my father. They’re both stocky men, with silver hair cropped short and slicked back. They both have the same blank black eyes.

My two father figures—mirror images of each other. One gave me my first gun, and the other gave me my first broken nose. One gave me the sex talk, the other gave me all my

nightmares. One tries to keep me alive, the other wants me dead.

But they both look the same. A total mindfuck.

“I was asleep,” I say to Anton.

He doesn’t smile. He just stares at me, unimpressed.

“For five days?”

“Maybe I’m under a curse.”

“You’re not a princess.”

I give him half a grin. “You won’t know until you kiss me, dedushka.”

“Stop flirting with me and put some clothes on. I didn’t come here to look at skinny naked fucks who smell of piss and vomit.”

Rolling my eyes, I stand off the couch. I’m not naked—I’m wearing boxers—but I do what Anton says because he’s not above dragging me out of my flat in my boxers.

I grab sweatpants and a T-shirt from a pile of clothes. They both smell a bit like sweat and a bit like detergent. There used to be a pile of clean clothes and a pile of worn clothes, balancing on the back of the armchair, but they’ve long since merged.

“Pack a bag, too,” says Anton. “You’re going to be in London for a while.”

“London?” I echo.

My father rarely sends me on business outside of the UK. Probably because he has less jurisdiction there. Less connections—less he can get away with.

That's probably why he's sending *me*.

“There's a couple of journalists there, two little shits who write for *The Sentinel*. They've been putting your father's name in articles where your father's name shouldn't appear. Rumour has it they're working on a big piece about corruption in Russian politics.” Anton gives a dry laugh. “Imagine that. Your father wants you to”—Anton gestures vaguely—“encourage them to mind their own business.”

“The old man is scared of two gossipmongers?”

Anton rolls his eyes at me again. “No. Your father's a private person—he needs to protect his privacy.”

“You mean he needs *me* to protect his privacy.”

Anton smiles. “There's a reason you're his favourite son.”

We both laugh. My father only has one legitimate child: his oldest son and heir, Andrei. Not only am I far from his favourite son, he barely even acknowledges I'm his son at all.

If he could kill me to make my skin into a blanket for Andrei, he definitely would.

He probably *will*, eventually.

I shoulder past one of the potato-faced goons to grab my toothbrush, razor and aftershave from the sink. I throw them into the bag with my clothes, my boxing wraps, a penknife and

the copy of Plato's *Republic* Zachary lent me last time I saw him.

It lands in my bag with a thud. That shit is heavier than a brick and just as big. "It's the perfect introduction to philosophy," the bastard said to me when he gave it to me. "A basic text. Give it a go."

I love Zachary Blackwood but lending me that book was a dick move.

"The old man wants me to go to London and what?" I ask Anton. "Break their fingers so they can no longer write?"

"Anybody can write without fingers nowadays," Anton says. His tone is light, which sends alarm bells through my head. "Technology's come so far, you know."

I say nothing, waiting for him to spit it out.

"He wants them dead. That's all. And make it clean. You're on your own in London."

"That's it, huh?" I mutter, half to myself. "Kill some guys and keep it clean?"

There's no point telling Anton I don't want to do this. There's no point telling Anton I don't think the punishment fits the crime, or that I don't want to get my hands dirty with the blood of writers who probably couldn't defend themselves against their own shadows.

Anton already knows all this. His response is queued up in his mouth, I can see it peeping behind the stiff blocks of his too-white teeth. Anton would just tell me that real men do

what they need to do, ask God for whatever forgiveness they can get, and sleep at night because it's just what men *do*.

Anton would remind me, politely or not so politely, that I don't have much of a choice.

"Cheer up, patsan," he says, suddenly reaching over to me to slap me hard on the shoulder. "We're putting you up at the Grand Elizabeth Hotel. You can live like a king instead of just rotting away in this hole. Fuck, seeing the way you live is depressing. Live it up, patsan, you're young. Don't you have friends in London from your private school days? All those rich fuckers you used to hang out with? Have fun with *them*. Go party, do some blow, get some pussy."

"Sure," I grunt. I have no intention of doing any of that. But his words *do* give me an idea.

An idea that hadn't occurred to me. An idea that might solve my problems while creating some more.

But at this point, who's counting?

Oblivious, Anton smiles and stands up, adjusting his suit jacket. "Good kid. Life doesn't have to be miserable. Do your job and live well. That's all your father wants."

He punctuates his sentence by yanking my phone off its charging cord and tossing it at me. I throw up an arm, and the edge of the phone catches the bone of my elbow. The phone lands on the couch behind me and bounces, landing on the ground.

“You shouldn’t blank your father’s calls,” Anton says, as if I didn’t get the point he was trying to make. “Now get on your fucking way. One of the cars will take you to the airport. I’ll have someone come fix your door while you’re gone.”

And then he leaves, taking his goons with him.

The echoes of his footsteps haven’t even faded when my phone starts its relentless buzzing again. *Another* call. Why the fuck is my father calling me if he’s already sent Anton to break my door and give me my orders?

I look down to turn my phone off and freeze when I see the screen.

The call isn’t from my father.

The opposite.

It’s from the only person in the world I obey without question, without hesitation, without expecting anything in return. The only person I know who has an actual working moral compass. The only person I consider a true friend, and the only man I would trust with my life if it came to it.

I pick up the call that’s still coming through and answer in a grunt.

“What’s up, Blackwood?”

# Being Nothing



## Zahara

WHEN I WAS FIFTEEN years old and my father found out about my relationship with my teacher, Mr Perrin, he was the angriest I ever saw him in my life.

That time, it was different to what happened with Uncle Reginald.

For one, I was older. Old enough to know what I was doing, and more importantly, to know what Mr Perrin was doing when he wrote me little notes or sat with his shoulder pressed next to mine to help me with homework after class.

My father knew that. That's why he was so angry when he brought me back home and told me I wasn't going back to St Agnes. He was angry because sending me to an all-girls school in France was supposed to protect my innocence and keep me safe, and his plan failed.

To this day, I still wish I could tell him it was the stupidest idea I've ever heard.

*If you wanted to keep me safe, you should have kept me close, I want to scream at him every time I see him. If you cared that much, you would never have sent me away. You would have kept me safe, but you didn't.*

My father was angry enough to take me out of St Agnes and put me in Spearcrest Academy, my perfect brother's perfect school for people who become politicians and CEOs and

Nobel Prize winners. He was angry enough to make Mr Perrin disappear off the face of the earth.

Despite all this anger, my father never said out loud that it was all my fault.

Instead, he wore his disappointment like a full set of armour, covering himself head to toe with it so that I never got to see him properly ever again.

His disappointment said what his words never did.

*I know it wasn't your fault, Zahara, but I still expected better from you.*

Wasn't that my father's favourite saying, after all?

*Being good is great—being best is better.*

I was never the best, and then I stopped even being good.

I just became nothing.



THAT'S WHY, EVEN AT my most lost and fearful, I don't go to my father.

Instead, I go to my brother. Zach is careful not to put any blame on me when he finds out what's been happening. He asks about how long it's been going on and he even carefully tries to find out why I didn't tell him earlier.

The thing with Zach is that he was made to personally witness every moment of shame I endured over the years. And since he's grown up into a sharply perceptive and emotionally intelligent man, he knows better than to perpetuate toxic cycles.

And yet.

No matter how gentle he is with me, he can't quite hide the expression in his eyes while I tell him what's been happening. The notes I received when I lived with Rhiannon and Sanvi during my first year of university, the note I received at the end of the summer, the break-in and the roses. Zach listens to it all and can't quite hide the infinitesimal shaking of his head.

Zach is disappointed too, but not in me. His disappointment is turned inwards as if what's been happening to me is a personal failure of his. Zach's disappointment isn't a stiff, cold outer shell; it hides inside him, peering at me through the windows of his eyes.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asks in a low voice. "Oh, Zaro. If only I'd known this was happening."

In his voice, I hear the words he doesn't say out loud.

*Why didn't you let me protect you? We both know you've never been able to protect yourself.*



THERE'S NO DISAPPOINTMENT IN Theodora Dorokhova. My brother's beautiful girlfriend comes down from Oxford with Zach and shares my hotel room the night of the break-in. When I lie awake, she stays up with me and reads to me the way she used to when I was younger. She doesn't press me with questions the following day, and she waits with me while Zach goes to my flat to clear out the mess of roses and have the locks replaced.

Theo shares a cab with me back to my apartment that evening, squeezing my hand in hers as I sit, tense and silent, looking out of the window. Part of me wants to be home in my apartment, reclaim my space and belongings. Part of me wishes I had agreed to abandon the apartment and find somewhere new to live.

When we enter the apartment, it looks the same as I remember it. Airy and luxuriously decorated with busts and plants and paintings and antiques. The tension in my shoulders eases a little. Zach has left on some errand, so Theo and I scour the flat, making sure everything is as it should be.

“Was there a note when you got home that night?” Theo asks when we're done.

“I didn’t stay to check,” I tell her over my shoulder as I water my plants. “Zach would have told us if he found one.”

“Hmm,” Theo says.

I turn to look back at her. Her pale gold hair is tied back into a low ponytail. She’s worn it short since her last year at Spearcrest. It suits her perfectly. She sits down on my sofa, pushing back the sleeves of her soft white jumper and pulling her well-used notebook out of her bag.

Theo hasn’t seemed disappointed even once since she found out what’s been happening. The opposite. She is full of righteous anger and determination, and based on the amount of notes she’s taking, in full detective mode.

“Right,” she says, flipping to the relevant page and clicking open the monogrammed pen Zach got her as a present when they both started at Oxford. “Can you remember the very first time you got one of those notes?”

I shake my head and answer her as I flit from plant to plant with my watering can.

“Not really. I didn’t think anything of it at the time, honestly. The winter of my first year of university, probably.”

“Do you remember what it said?”

“Not really. Something creepy probably.”

“I surmised,” she says with a bitter smile. “And after that? When was the next note?”

“After that, nothing until I went back to university. I got one at the start of the term last year. Then I got flowers around Valentine’s Day, but I thought that was just from one of my friends or someone I was dating at the time. I didn’t make the connection straight away.”

“Who were you dating at the time?”

Theo’s eyes are fixed on her notebook as she takes notes. She has the same look of concentration in her blue eyes as she used to have when she and Zach used to stay up late at night writing essays during their weirdly intense Oxford rivalry years.

“I don’t remember... there was Emilio, this guy from university who asked me out, and I think I might have been seeing Erik around that time as well...”

Theo looks up but doesn’t say anything. The subject of Erik is always a touchy one because I was so young when I met him. Theo probably thinks I only started seeing Erik out of spite because Zach and his attack dog didn’t want me to.

“Alright,” Theo says calmly. “Is it possible the flowers could have been from Emilio or... Erik?”

I shake my head. “Emilio and I only went on a few dates, and Erik...” I let out a short laugh. “Erik isn’t the type to send flowers.”

Theo’s eyes flick up to me, and for a split second, I catch a familiar expression in her eyes, one she always tries to hide.

Pity.

It's gone in a flash, shoved back behind a stoic nod as Theo carries on. "Do you think either of them could have sent the notes?"

"I highly doubt it."

I answer her with assurance, but I don't tell her the full truth.

Because the full truth is that I don't think any man I've been with would have sent notes or flowers. The men I've been with all broke my heart, not the other way around. If any of them wanted me, they wouldn't need to stalk me.

They could have just kept me.

And that's a truth so pathetic I could never say it aloud. Not even to myself, let alone to Theo. Theo, who's bathed in the golden light of my brother's love for as long as they've known each other. She could never understand.

"We're going to find out who did this," Theo says in a fierce tone. "You don't deserve to feel unsafe in your own home. You don't deserve to feel unsafe."

A lump rises in my throat at her words. How could Theo possibly know that I *never* feel safe? That I struggle to sleep at night and jump at every noise? That I sometimes feel like I could just disappear off the face of the earth and nobody would remember me the next day?

I hitch a smile on my face. It's my soft, lovely, harmless smile, my carefree socialite smile.

"Thanks, Theo."



AFTER THE SUN SETS over Knightsbridge, Theo and I sit together on my sofa, waiting for Zach to come pick her up. My head is on her shoulder and we share a blanket while basking in the comforting softness of a historical romance movie. To me, the film is a comforting lie, but I wonder how it must feel for Theo, who's found the exact kind of love the heroine gets in the story.

“Zaro.” Theo's voice startles me. “Are you sure you wouldn't like to come stay with us for a while?”

The righteous determination from earlier has given way to a delicate sadness. Theodora is heartbreaking when she's sad—I understand why my brother can't bear it. Her blue eyes go big, her mouth droops at the corners, and the light of her seems to falter and fade.

I shake my head. “I can't, Theo. I have lectures, classes, my dissertation. My degree, my friends. I can't just leave it all behind. Besides—” I look up into her eyes. “Just because there's a hunter out there doesn't mean I should go into hiding. I refuse to stop living my life to accommodate some—some creep.”

She nods. After all, Theo knows what it's like to be forced to live in fear because of a man.



She shifts uncomfortably in her seat and glances down at her phone.

“And you wouldn’t consider staying at a hotel, just while we try to find whoever’s doing this? You’d still be able to continue as before, only you might feel safer with the added security?”

I clench my jaw and look away.

Zachary spent the majority of my last conversation with him trying to convince me to leave my apartment, to stay at a hotel. I know it’s because he’s worried about me. Just like Rhiannon and Sanvi, Zach is thinking about the inevitable escalation. Zach is thinking about what could happen next, and he wants to stop *that* from happening.

But my flat is the only place that’s truly mine. I refuse to be bullied out of it.

When Uncle Reginald sent flowers, *I* was the one who had to be sent to boarding school in France, far away from my family.

When my relationship with Mr Perrin was discovered, *I* was the one who had to leave St Agnes, be separated from my friends and skip a school year and start from scratch at Spearcrest.

Why am *I* always the one who has to retreat?

It’s not happening. Not again. Not this time.

“I’m going to be alright, Theo.” I speak to her like I’m telling her the truth, even though I’m not. “I promise.”

She nods but says nothing, her eyes falling from me to her phone. Eventually, she sighs and stands up to look out of the window.

“Zach’s here,” she says in a hushed tone, throwing me a worried look.

At first, I think it’s because she’s worried about going back home with Zach and leaving me alone in the flat.

And then we hear the sound of Zach’s keys in the door, and approaching footsteps. The smell of cigarettes wafts from the corridor, and I realise, all of a sudden, why Theo is so stressed.

I don’t even see Zach as he comes into the room. My gaze plunges past him, into the shadow of the corridor, from which a towering silhouette emerges. And then I’m looking into a pair of empty black eyes and my lungs constrict, refusing to let air in. My throat tightens and my heartbeat explodes.

My voice leaves my throat before I’m even aware I’m speaking. “Oh, absolutely fucking *not*.”

“Long time no see, Kolyuchka.”

# BOOK TWO



*The Quest of the  
Silver Archer  
&  
the Knife Named  
Thorn*



# Orphan Fawn

## Iakov

“YOU DON’T LEARN FROM your mistakes, Blackwood?”

“I learn from my mistakes, Kavinski. The problem is that *she* doesn’t learn from hers.”

Our reunion wasn’t exactly one for the books, but then again Zachary Blackwood is the only friend I see regularly. I even spent last Christmas with him and his Theodora at their apartment in Oxford, and although I didn’t have a clue what they were talking about half the time, it was the best sleep I had all year. We parted with the promise to see each other again soon, and Zachary gave me his copy of Plato’s *Republic* to read in the meantime.

I’ve not made it past the first fifty pages yet, but then I didn’t expect to see him again this soon.

“You think this is her fault?” I ask, glancing out of the cab window as London flies past, grey and green. “This whole stalker thing?”

“*Of course* it’s not her fault.” Zachary sighs and rubs a hand across his face.

Despite how often I see him, Zachary never changes. The passage of time flows over him like water over stone. He looks the same as he did in Spearcrest, with his woollen jumpers and his leather loafers and gold-framed glasses.

But today, for the first time, he looks older. Worried.

Tired.

I notice it as soon as he picks me up from the airport. Even in the dim shade of his private cab's blacked-out windows, I can see the frown tugging on his features, the dread lurking in his eyes.

I'm not used to seeing him like this, and I fucking hate it.

"I just want to keep her safe—why is that so hard?" Zachary shakes his head with a grimace. "She's twenty-one, for god's sake. I thought protecting her would get easier, not harder."

"She doesn't *want* your protection."

It's a hard truth, and Zachary needs to hear it. I respect him too much not to say it to his face.

He's not going to listen, though. *I* wouldn't. When it comes to Lena, common sense flies out of the window and the only thing left is the primal urge to defend and protect. I felt that same primal urge all those years ago when Zach asked me to protect his little sister for the first time, so how could he not?

Not that it's going to make a difference to her. She couldn't care less how he feels; she just wants to be free. And why shouldn't she? Isn't that what we all want?

"Why doesn't she just move?" I ask, throwing Zach a sidelong glance. "Keep the new address a secret? Compromise and shit."

"She doesn't want to give up the flat." Zach shakes his head. "I tried."

“Can’t blame her.” I gesture at the apartment building the cab has been parked in front of. “Nice place, this. Knightsbridge, huh? Fancy as fuck.”

“Not fancy enough to risk getting murdered in her bed,” Zachary mutters darkly.

I straighten myself and slap his shoulder. “She won’t. I’m here now, aren’t I?”

Zachary nods, but the reassurance on his face disappears quickly, replaced by bleak despair.

“She’s going to be *so very angry*, Kav.”

“With you, yeah. She already hates me.”

“She doesn’t hate you.” Zach says it like a statement, but his eyes widen questioningly.

“She hates my fucking guts. Wouldn’t be surprised if she calls the police on me again.”

“She doesn’t *hate* you.” Zachary frowns. “She took you to Paris, didn’t she? Our last year in Spearcrest.”

“Because her friends wanted her to.”

“Well, yes, and because you’re trustworthy and can keep her safe.” Zachary’s mouth twists. “Right...?”

I laugh. “Wrong. She took me because I’m too fucking dumb to have a single independent thought and I’ll just do what I’m told like a dog.”

“She said that?”

“Yea.”



Zachary blinks slowly, his clever eyes searching my face.

“I’m sorry, Kav. You’re not dumb, and you’re not a dog.”

I think about Danyl Stepanovich making me run around Moscow doing his bidding, my father yanking on my leash and sending me to London to kill journos. I grin at Zachary. “You whistled and I came, didn’t I?”

“It’s not like that.”

Zachary seems so genuinely stricken by the idea that I have to throw him a bone. Ironic.

“Calm down, man. It’s a joke. I’m not a dog, you don’t treat me like one. Alright? It’s all good.”

He lets out a sigh and checks his phone. “Better go up.”

We get out of the cab and I reach for the box of cigarettes in my pocket. “You’ve told her?”

“No, Kav, I have not. I was scared she would—god, I don’t even know. Scream at me. Run away.” Zachary lets out a tired laugh, running his hands down his face. “Call the police on both of us?”

I shrug—it’s definitely a possibility—and follow Zachary into the apartment building. It’s even fancier inside than outside, with big marble flagstones and old-fashioned lamps hanging from the ceiling and an elevator with a bronze grill. I gesture up at the ceilings.

“No CCTV?”

“Apparently not,” Zachary says, leading me to the elevator. “That’s why I need your help. Think you could find the guy?”

“I can try.” Thorny Zahara is probably going to make it as difficult for me as possible, but I don’t say that to Zachary. “What do we do if we find him? Kill him?”

Zachary hesitates. He looks at me like he doesn’t know whether I’m joking or not.

“It’s a tempting offer,” he says finally. “But let’s decide when we get there. In the meantime, will it be alright for you to keep an eye on her? I know I’m asking a lot, Kav, and I already owe you a lifetime of favours.”

“I have some shit I need to do in London,” I tell him. “But I’ll do my best.” I grin at him. “Sleep on her doorstep and make sure nobody gets past.”

“She has a guest bedroom, you know,” Zachary says with a short laugh. “What are you up to these days anyway? I’ve not heard back from you since Christmas—you’re almost worse at texting back than Zaro. God,” he says suddenly, covering his mouth, “we’ve not even properly caught up. I feel like such a bastard. I’m not... taking you away from a job or a girlfriend or anything?”

“Nah. My only job right now is killing journalists—this is a nice break.”

Zachary’s eyes widen. “Killing journali—please tell me you’re joking.”

I laugh, and before I can say anything, Zachary stops in front of a tall door with the number 12 inscribed into a shiny plaque.

“We’re here,” he says in a hushed tone, anxiety written on every line of his face. “She’s going to be so very angry, Kav.”

“Let’s place bets,” I say, tapping his shoulder bracingly. “Who does she slap first, you or me?”

“Hah. Definitely you.”

Zach pulls a key out of his pocket, reaches for the lock, and then stops, looking back at me.

“Iakov. From the bottom of my heart—thank you. I owe you—I always will. Anything you want from me, ask for it.”

I tilt my head. “Yea? I’ve not had time to pick up my London bike. It’s still in a locker near the airport. I need it to get about.”

He gives a quick nod. “Text me the storage place address, I’ll have it dropped off first thing tomorrow. Anything else?”

I sigh. “Plato’s *Republic*. Come on, man. Do I really have to read it?”

Zachary’s face falls. “Well, it *is* the perfect introduction to philosophy, but... I’m not saying you *have* to read it, of course, just that it would greatly improve your mind and spirit to—”

With the first real smile I’ve smiled in a long time, I grab his neck in the crook of my arm and hug him to me. “Missed you, man.”

“I missed you too, Kav.”

And then he opens the door, and all hell breaks loose.



THE FIRST TIME I met Zahara Blackwood, she was sixteen years old and chock-full of pain and hunger.

It was all I could see when I looked at her, even through the sheen of her beauty, that shiny carapace of high heels, lip gloss and gleaming curls. It pooled in her eyes, those big brown eyes like an orphan fawn, like a cartoon doe with a murdered family. Her eyes were the same colour as her brother's, but where Zach's gaze was all confidence and self-certainty, his little sister's was a drowning pool of sadness and unmet want.

It was all I could see when I looked at her, and it made my insides churn. Being around her was like having the wound of Lena unstitched and ripped open in my gut. Every time I followed Zahara around, I had the feeling I was leaving a trail of blood in our wake, a shiny crimson lake for Zahara to glance down at and preen at her own reflection.

Because she was beautiful, and she knew it, even back then.

She fed on her own beauty and perpetually starved, like feasting on the colours of a prism. Pretty, empty mouthfuls

incapable of giving her the nourishment she so desperately craved.

Did Zahara Blackwood find whatever she was so hungry for all that time?

Zach precedes me into her flat and I follow him. I've barely closed the front door behind me before Zahara appears in the rectangle of light at the end of the corridor. Her voice comes out of her like it's been ripped from her vocal cords.

“Oh, absolutely fucking *not*.”

She's taller, older—different. Even her voice is different. It's deeper, lazier, with a sort of rasping quality like there's smoke in her throat. She's wearing an oversized jumper in deep brown wool over a black silk skirt, legs bare, her hair an explosion of curls around her head. She looks like a woman—she *is* a woman.

And yet.

I meet her eyes, and the hunger inside her yawns deeper than ever, so deep it barely leaves any room for anything else. I look into her eyes and I'm reminded of the black lake in Yalinka. It makes my gut clench; a sudden wave of hopelessness washes over me.

What happened to her to make her this way?

When I speak, my voice comes out bleak and tired. “Long time no see, Kolyuchka.”

“Don't you dare call me that.” Her smoky voice shakes with fury. “Don't you dare call me *anything*. In fact, don't talk at

all.” It’s not just her voice that’s shaking. Her entire body trembles; she means every word she’s saying. “Just turn around and go back to whatever kennel my brother’s dragged you from.”

“Zaro!” Zach exclaims in horror.

She doesn’t even look at him. Her eyes remain stabbed into mine, she rushes forward and shoves me with both hands thrust into my chest.

“Get the fuck out of my house!” she cries out hoarsely. “I told you I never want to see you again!”

“What?” Zach sounds lost, and behind Zahara, Theodora’s crestfallen face shows the same confusion. “Why?”

“Did something happen, Zaro?” Theodora asks more gently, her soft voice bringing sudden calm to the razor-sharp tension.

Zahara looks at me, shaking all over. I tilt my head questioningly, waiting for instructions. She says nothing, her gaze locked into mine, a chain of helpless fury and painful hatred tethering her to me.

“Kav?” Zach asks.

“Don’t,” his sister bites out.

I obey her like a dog and stay silent as the grave.

# Broken Plea

## Zahara

THE LAST TIME I saw Iakov Kavinski, I swore I would never see him again.

I swore it like a bloody oath to an ancient god. At the time, I would have given up my life before I gave up that vow. I never wanted to see him again, and now that he's standing right in front of me, I'm filled with such powerful shame and hatred it burns me like acid. I feel like throwing up, like crying.

Zachary and Theodora ask me if something's happened, but that's something I'll never tell them as long as I live.

I look into the sepulchral black eyes of that awful bastard, and he says nothing at all.

Iakov Kavinski never lies.



THE ONLY MAN I'VE ever broken up with is Erik Mattner, and even then, he still gets to be the one who broke my heart.

I'm nineteen, and we've been together for almost a year. My longest relationship yet. Or rather, I *thought* it was a relationship. Looking back, I realise I just had an inordinate ability for self-delusion.



My relationship with Erik Mattner is another death by a thousand cuts. Each cut feels deep enough to kill me, but it never is. Then, one night, all of a sudden, the thousandth cut is delivered, a slash to the heart, and the long-awaited metaphorical death comes.

It's that time when night and morning are a confusing blur. Erik has taken me clubbing—or rather, has gone clubbing with me on his arm. He likes being photographed arriving at clubs with me; the only times he ever posts about me is to reference articles with titles like *Millionaire Tech Bad Boy Clubbing With London Duchess Darling* and *Maverick King of Crypto Bags Himself Sexy Socialite*.

Once we get to the club, though, it's a different story. Whereas I *know* everyone, Erik likes to be *seen* with everyone. And he has a particular preference for beautiful young heiresses. This shouldn't surprise me: after all, I was once the beautiful young heiress he coveted.

But it still hurts to see him make his way around the club, whispering into the ears of gorgeous girls. Even if most times, I'm still the one he takes home, and his flirting is mostly, as he puts it, *networking*. It still hurts, every time.

And after almost a year of swallowing my pain, and because I've unwisely spent the evening drinking the pain away, a part of me finally breaks.

I'm drunk, my head hurts, and I'm so heartsick my chest is about to cave in on itself. Erik is in the VIP booth, on a couch, watching the bottle service girls. His arms are draped over the

back of his seat while two young socialites flank him. They look as beautiful and young and triumphant for his attention as I once did, listening to whatever self-satisfied bullshit he's forever spouting.

It's humiliating having to push past one of the girls to talk in Erik's ear, but I'm too drunk and hurt for pride.

"Can we go?" I ask him. "I'm not feeling well."

"Take my limo, baby," he says with the smile of a benevolent king.

At that point, I should gather what's left of my dignity and leave. I don't.

"I thought we could go home together," I say instead.

I hate myself even as I say it. I don't even want to go home with him. I don't want to be in his bed, I don't want to talk to him and I *really* don't want to have sex with him.

All I want, I realise later on, is to not hurt anymore. Being around Erik never makes the pain go away, but it's a different enough kind of pain to feel like relief.

"Not tonight," he says with a dismissive flick of a finger.

The two girls are looking up at me, watching the conversation. They're just girls out to have fun; there are no smug smirks, no bitchy snickers. They look at me with alcohol-glazed eyes and a faint expression of mingled surprise and embarrassment.

It makes me want to die inside.

It makes me desperate enough to say, “*Please, Erik.*”

And that’s when he loses his patience.

“Fucking hell, Zee, you’re so *needy!* Let a man breathe, for Christ’s sake. If you’re so desperate for affection, just get a fucking dog—right?” and he looks at the girls for confirmation, as if they know me well enough to agree with him.

They give a small, awkward laugh, but the pity in their eyes makes my skin crawl. I recoil like he’s slapped me, and I leave on my own, teetering through the club with the music beating through me, dancing bodies knocking me from side to side.

Outside, it’s raining, a steady dirty London drizzle with the fog rising to meet it.

I slump back against the cold, slimy wall outside, my throat knotted up, cold and shuddering all over. Everything hurts and my head is spinning and my insides clench like I’m about to vomit.

Groping around my clutch, I take my phone out. I stare at it for a long time until the screen becomes blurry with raindrops. Erik’s limo is waiting a little further down the road, but being in Erik’s limo is the last thing I want right now. I didn’t want to call a cab. I’m too embarrassed to call my friends and too sad to call Zach.

All I can think of is Erik’s advice.

*If you’re so desperate for affection, just get a fucking dog.*



I DON'T EVEN REMEMBER dialling the number. All I remember is the tall figure, all in black like the Grim Reaper, except his face is hidden by the visor of a helmet instead of a hood.

I remember sitting on his horrible motorbike, arms wrapped around his body for dear life. Noticing how warm he is when I press close to him. So warm I almost protest when the bike finally stops and he makes me get off him.

He doesn't take me home. He doesn't know where I live and I refuse to tell him. I'm vaguely aware he's moved back to Russia after leaving Spearcrest. He only comes back to England during holidays to visit Zach and Theo. I never intended to see him again. I didn't even think he would show up. But he did.

I remember that night in pieces, and all the pieces are jagged and discordant, shards of a broken mirror.

Stumbling up to the sliding glass doors of a hotel lobby. Big arms lifting me, cradling me into the solid wall of a chest. The smell of cigarettes and motor oil and cheap cologne and the faint musk of sweat. The mirrored wall of an elevator, a knight all in black holding a princess in a golden dress, her caramel-

brown braids draped over his shoulder and tumbling down like a waterfall.

In the hotel room, he set me down on the velvet ottoman. Some of those details I remember so vividly I often wonder if I've imagined them. The towel he used to pat me dry from the rain. Him kneeling at my feet, the towering height of him folded like paper, to unlace my shoes. The shudder his fingers sent through me when they brushed the back of my calves as he untied the knot. The glass of water he forced me to drink. The way he carried me to my bed.

When I called Iakov Kavinski to me in my hour of need, he came without hesitation. He brought me to a hotel room, dried the rain off me and set me delicately into bed. And then he stood to leave, and that's where the memory *should* have ended.

If I was given a second chance to change one thing in my life—anything—I would change what I did then.

Because instead of letting my silent saviour retreat into the shadows from which he's appeared, I grab his arm. I pull with both hands, making him sit at the edge of the bed. And I sit up and look into his face, that face I can't stand.

That hard, pale face, with the inexpressive mouth and those black, empty eyes, and that rough buzz cut like a soldier or a prisoner. That night, he has a purple bruise near his mouth and the fading remains of a black eye.

I look into his face and a hundred questions flutter on my lips like translucent moth wings, and I can't ask a single one

because all the questions are really just one broken plea.

*Please love me.*

So instead, I lurch forward, and I press my drunken mouth to the bruised lips of Iakov Kavinski.



MY MEMORY OF THAT night is a blurry, uncertain thing, but Iakov's reaction to that kiss is burned into my consciousness.

I barely touch my lips to his long enough to find out if he tastes like the cigarettes he relentlessly smokes. His hands shoot up to grip my arm. He pushes me away from him and reels back like I'm a venomous snake about to bite him. For a moment, he looks right at me, right *into* me, with that terrible gaze, penetrating and impenetrable all at once.

There's a moment of silence, of unbearable tension.

He could say anything at all—I don't even know what I *want* him to say. I know what I want him to do, and I know what I want from him. In the end, he only utters one word.

“No.”

Even in his rejection, the bastard remains bleak and blunt.

“I know you want me,” I spit at him.

“You don’t know what I want,” he says.

And then he stands, tosses me the room keycard and picks up his helmet.

“Go to sleep, Kolyuchka,” he says. “The room is paid for, you can go home in the morning.”

Iakov barely ever speaks Russian; the only Russian word he ever uses around me is this one. *Kolyuchka*—thorn. A constant reminder of what I am.

“Don’t call me that,” I rasp, sobs crowding my throat like dynamite, waiting to explode. “And stop treating me like a child, you patronising bastard.”

He gives a one-shoulder shrug. “Stop acting like one.”

All the humiliation and pain and rejection and hurt whirlpool inside my chest, dragging me down. That’s when I start grabbing things at random and throwing them at him, my aim poor through the disorienting blur of tears.

“Get out! Get out! I want you out—out of my life! I never want to see you again, I never want to see your face again and I curse the fucking day I ever hear your name, I hope—I hope —”

The sobs catch up with me, at last. I don’t remember everything I say but I remember digging deep, reaching low, as low as I can, to hurl whatever I can at him, to make him feel even a fraction of my pain.

But Iakov is impervious to pain. He lets me pelt him with everything that falls under my hand and every insult that rises

to my mouth. At the door, he stops to say, “I’ll be there next time you need me.”

His final insult—a reminder I’ll always be the weak, vulnerable, helpless girl he sees me as.

“I’ll die before I ever ask you for help!”

My words meet a closed door. He’s already left.

And that’s the last time I saw him. Until now.



# Full Bloom

## Iakov

IT TAKES THE COMBINED efforts of Zachary and Theodora—mostly Theodora, since Zahara looks like she wants to kill her brother with her bare hands—to get Zahara to finally calm down.

Even as she sits down and is handed a cup of camomile tea by Theodora, Zahara keeps repeating over and over again, “I want him gone. I don’t need him. He’s not staying. I want him *gone*.”

I stand in the doorway to her living room. Her flat could not be more different to mine: all fancy furniture and velvet cushions and candles and paintings and enough plants and forests to make it look like a garden. A place far too beautiful for scum like me.

Zachary is the smartest person I know, but he’s made a miscalculation bringing me here.

“Hear me out, Zaro,” he’s saying, sitting on the edge of a chair with his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped together. “You don’t want to go to the police and I understand why. You don’t want to move out of your apartment, and I respect that—you don’t deserve to have your life upturned every time something bad happens to you. And I know how you feel about being treated like a child. I remember our Spearcrest days well enough. I don’t want to repeat past mistakes. But this is the only reasonable solution I can think

of, the only way of keeping you safe without compromising your privacy and independence.”

“How the fuck do you figure that, Zach?” Zahara asks. “How is setting your dog on me again anything *but* a violation of my privacy and independence?”

“He’s not a dog,” Zach says, throwing me an apologetic look. “He’s a good friend—the best friend I have, in fact—and he’s doing this as a favour for me because he cares about your wellbeing the same way Theo and I do.”

“Oh, please!” Zahara exclaims, finally looking at me. The hatred in her eyes glows like red fireworks. “He doesn’t give a single particular fuck if I live or die. He’s here out of loyalty to *you*, Zach, not me, so stop lying to yourself.”

“If you want to believe that, believe that,” Zachary says with an exhausted sigh. “Believe what you want. I don’t care. I’m not so proud as to refuse to admit when I’m scared. I’m fucking scared, Zaro—I’m scared for you, and if I’m being honest, I’m scared all the time. I love you and respect you, and I’ll never get in the way of you living your life the way you want to, but you can’t—you can’t *possibly* ask me to stand by and do nothing when you’re in genuine danger.”

His voice shakes. I’ve seen Zahara sad and angry often—she’s a little creature all of sadness and fury—but the last time I saw Zach so broken was when he thought he’d lost the love of his life. He stops to catch his breath, and Theodora slides into the chair at his side, pressing close to him. She rests her chin on his shoulder, and he grows visibly calmer.

“This man—he’s not going to stop, Zaro,” Zachary continues. “He’s going to keep going, and I don’t want to wait for a tragedy to happen before I do something. Don’t you know that if anything happened to you, it would *destroy* me?”

Zaro shifts in her seat. She’s staring into her teacup, and her curls have fallen past her face, half-obscuring her expression.

“I know,” she says finally, in the tiniest voice.

“We can’t go to the police, and you don’t want to risk this getting public, and you won’t move away, and I can’t stay here with you to look after you, and you won’t stay with me and Theo, and I know you’d rather die than tell our parents,” Zachary says hoarsely. “So there’s only so much I can do. Iakov isn’t here to spy on you or control you or anything you want to accuse him of. He’s here to make sure nothing bad happens to you and to help us find that bastard so you can live in peace. That’s all. Then he goes back to living his life, and you go back to living yours. You never have to see him again.”

He finally stops, and the entire tense line of his body loosens as he rests his head, for a fraction of a second, against Theo’s. Zaro looks at him, then at me, then away. She’s holding on tight to her teacup, but I can still see that she’s shaking.

“I hate him,” she says, like spitting out a tight, hard knot of frustration from her throat.

“Why do you hate him, Zaro?” Theo says, in that gentle voice of hers, like cool water and liquid silver.

“*He* knows why,” Zaro says, piercing me with another death glare.

“I’m fucking depressing to be around,” I say.

Zach and Theo both look up at me with matching expressions of utter confusion. They really *are* a picture-perfect couple. They could have been cut out of a magazine. Lucky fucking sods.

And since I don’t say anything else, and Zahara doesn’t contradict me, they have no choice but to accept that I’m telling the truth.



OVER THE YEARS, ZAHARA has hurled so many insults and accusations at me that I couldn’t possibly pick just one to pin all her hatred on. My understanding is that she finds me, in general, stupid, servile, depressing, dirty, poor and dull.

She might not be entirely wrong. I don’t blame her for not wanting to be around me. I can barely stand being around myself.



WHEN THEO AND ZACH leave, they both spend almost a half-hour in the doorway of Zahara's apartment, heaping thanks and apologies at my feet.

"She's not angry at you," Zach says, "she's just angry at the situation, I'm sure."

Is he lying to me or himself? He probably can't comprehend the idea of his sister hating me so much. I wonder what Plato's *Republic* says on the subject of hate and sadness and misplaced anger. Maybe that'd help him understand why it'll never be a good idea to ask me to look after his sister.

Theo clearly understands a little more because she doesn't give me any such reassurance. Instead, she hugs me tight, her head tucked under my chin.

"Thank you so much for this, Iakov. She's scared—we're all scared, but we all feel better for you being here. And I know she will, too, in time."

I laugh and pat her head. "That, or she'll kill me in my sleep."

"She wouldn't," Zach says, unconvinced.

I shrug and hug them both goodbye and watch them disappear behind the gleaming grill of the elevator.

When I go back into the flat, Zahara waits for me with her arms crossed, looking as if she's planning to kill me in my sleep.

"Missed me, huh?" I ask.

"Go to hell."

I laugh without any joy whatsoever. "Already there."



SHE ICILY SHOWS ME to a guest room that looks like the rest of her flat: all gold and green, beautifully decorated and full of plants and candles and paintings. Her lip curls in disgust when I drop my old duffel bag at the foot of the bed. I give her a look.

"Prefer me to sleep on the floor?"

She sneers. "That's where dogs sleep, isn't it?"

"Dunno, never had one."

"They're overrated." She looks me up and down. "They stink and take up too much space."

"Subtle," I say.

"Subtlety would be lost on you."

I nod. "Probably." I shrug off my jacket and look at her. "You gonna tell me what happened or you need to beat on me

some more?”

“Don’t pretend Zach didn’t spill everything he knows on the way here,” she says.

Given she’s grown up into such a gorgeous, glossy woman, she’s so sharp it almost surprises me. The rose might be in full bloom, but the stem is thornier than ever.

“He didn’t seem to know much,” I tell her. “I think you know more.”

“I told him everything I know.”

“You know who the guy is?” I ask, tilting my head.

She watches me for a long moment, saying nothing at all. The only person in the world who looks at me with such naked hatred and disgust is my own father, so it says a lot that I still like her, somehow.

“I’m hungry,” she says finally, as if she’s just made up her mind about something. “Go pick us up some food. Then I’ll tell you everything I know.”

When she was a teenager, she’d sometimes send me on errands like this, but always with this sense of shame and embarrassment. That’s long gone now. Now, she commands me like a queen to her servant. I obey her—I’m nothing if not her servant.

I put my jacket back on and let her give me the address to a sushi place nearby, and I obediently leave to get her food. And when I come back, it doesn’t surprise me even a little bit to find her door firmly locked on me.



# Deadly Grace

## Zahara

*MAYBE IAKOV WON'T COME back. Maybe he'll take the hint that I don't want him anywhere near me and disappear.*

I pace my apartment, soothing myself with positive thinking.

*Maybe he's not coming back and I won't have to share my personal space with a six-foot-five chain-smoking beast of a man who can't string a full sentence together. Maybe—*

A fist falls on my door and brings me crashing back to reality. I look up, glaring at the door.

I should have known he would be too stubborn to take a hint.

“I'm not letting you in!” I tell him through the door. “So go away!”

Silence answers me. I check the peephole, but all I can see is the enormous silhouette blocking out the light.

“I'm being deadly serious!” I shout. “I'm not letting you in. Go away!”

He doesn't say anything and doesn't move. How is it possible that I've not seen this man in almost two years, and yet he's not managed to change at all?

He looks the same, wears the same clothes, and still has his hair shorn to the skull like he's an eternal inmate of the prison of life. He even smells like he still smokes the same cigarettes.

And the way he stands outside my door, not saying anything and refusing to leave, is exactly how he was back in Spearcrest.

Outside a club on a Friday night, watching me impassively while I flirted in the blurry faces of strangers. Back then, Iakov never intervened unless I was about to leave or someone was about to touch me. Like some old-world knight in a leather jacket, he would let me make all my own choices until my actions threatened whatever state of safety he arbitrarily decided I should always remain within.

And when that happened, the coin would flip, and the other side of Iakov would come out.

I shudder and move away from my door and into my kitchen. I pour myself a massive glass of red wine, grab the leftover box of fancy biscuits from out of my pantry and slump down onto my couch with a defeated sigh.

My annoyance slowly gives way to a sort of morose sense of defeat. I eat the biscuits and try to distract myself with some university work, but I can't concentrate. Iakov's presence seeps through the cracks around my door, slowly filling the flat with the darkness of him.

"You fucking ghoul," I mutter at the door when I pass it on my way to the bathroom.

I place my freshly refilled glass of wine on the edge of the bathtub and run myself a bath. I make it extra decadent, with flower petals and candles. I consider bringing in a volume of erotica from my exquisitely curated collection, but the thought

of touching myself with my brother's friend and personal dogsbody in such proximity is repellent.

It's late into the night by the time I finish my bath and climb into bed. The London streets have fallen completely silent outside the windows. I try to read but I'm too restless to sit still.

"Fuck it all," I say out loud to nobody or nothing in particular.

I get out of bed and tiptoe to the front door. Pressing my cheek against the panel, I peer out. The corridor is empty.

I unlatch and unlock the door, pulling it open slowly. I pop my head out, looking up and down the corridor.

I'm disappointed but not surprised to find Iakov sitting next to my door, his back against the wall, his arms propped on his knees. He doesn't look relieved, or triumphant, or annoyed. He just looks at me with that blank mask he has for a face.

He makes no effort to rush past me or force his way in. He sits in silence, waiting in that long-suffering way of his, like an obedient dog that would never dream of biting the hand of its master.

"I can't stand you," I tell him.

"I know," he says.

I turn around and get back in the flat, leaving the door open behind me.



I SIT AT THE kitchen island, legs crossed, arms folded over the marble countertop. Iakov plops the bag of food I sent him to get in front of me and stands back, looking around. He doesn't seem at all angry that I tried to trick him, or that I made him wait for so long, but I didn't expect him to be.

“You really have nothing better going on in your life than doing whatever my brother tells you?” I ask him with a defeated sigh.

He shrugs. “Slow month.”

“I imagine every month is a slow month for you,” I reply with a smirk.

There's something about Iakov that makes me want to lash out at him with everything I have. The urge to hurt him was like an itch when I was sixteen—now, it feels like an old addiction that's flared back to life more powerful than ever.

“Whatever Zachary told you—he's almost definitely blown it out of proportion,” I snap. “So if you think you're going to be defending me against an army of stalkers, kidnappers and molesters like a warrior in one of your stupid video games, then you're going to be very disappointed.”

I wait for his response. He looks at me in silence for a moment, that horrible look like falling into a black pond and sinking into some gaping abyss. I look away first.

“He said someone broke into your flat and left roses,” he says.

“And you think having you move in with me is a reasonable response to something so stupid?”

“Were you scared?”

I look at him—not his eyes. *Him*. His rough buzz cut, like he did it himself in the mirror of a public restroom. The tattoos peeking from his clothes: the wings of a raven wrapping around his neck from the back, the brambles around his neck, the numbers on the back of his fingers he always refused to tell me about. His leather jacket and black boots, worn almost ragged.

There are no new bruises on him, only old scars on his face and hard scabs on his knuckles. But he still looks rough—he always looks *so rough*. His father is an oligarch, for fuck’s sake. I looked him up—Pavel Kavinski. When I was sixteen, I read everything I could on him, going as far as to pull up Russian articles and run them through online translators.

Iakov Kavinski isn’t some destitute nobody from some brutal inner-city neighbourhood—his father is one of the most powerful men in Russia, with a hand in everything from politics to real estate to arms dealing.

So why does Iakov always look so down, so tired, so *feral*?

I *hate* it. I've always hated it, and I hate it so much more now that we're older. Iakov looks and feels like he belongs to another world, like he shouldn't be standing here, in my beautiful flat, amongst antique books and gilded Louis XVI candelabras and bouquets of fresh peonies, asking me about *fear*.

I lie to his face. "Of course, I wasn't scared. Do you think this is the first time a guy's sent me roses?"

"Thought it was the first time a guy broke into your place."

I roll my eyes and give him a pointed look. "Believe it or not, Iakov, some men don't respect women's need for *privacy*."

He snorts a laugh and steps closer.

"Help me catch the guy," he says. "Then I can fuck off back to my kennel. Right?"

I lick my lips and falter for the first time. I hate that Iakov never lies to me—it always throws me off. Because if he's saying he'll leave after we catch the stalker, then he's telling the truth.

And it's not like I'm disappointed or like I'll be sad when he goes.

*And yet.*

His words knock a sadness into me that makes my throat close up. I take a sip of my wine and my hand trembles. Iakov doesn't say anything.

A moment passes, the silence ringing loud. But I let it pass just to give myself time to swallow back the emotions, just to make sure I can speak without my voice breaking.

“I don’t know who it is,” I admit. “I wish I did, and I would tell you. But I genuinely have no idea.”

“You got suspects?”

I glance down at my glass of wine. “Most men have the capacity of being secret psychopaths, so I suppose you could say every man I’ve dated is technically a suspect.”

“Long list?”

He doesn’t ask the question like he’s trying to find out if I’ve been sleeping around. He probably doesn’t care.

Iakov has never cared what I did. He’s only ever cared if I was safe because it’s what Zach told him to care about. So when he asks the question, I know it’s only because he’s just trying to find out how many suspects he needs to work through.

And for some reason, that’s when it sinks in: Iakov is only here until he finds the stalker. That’s it. He didn’t defend himself when I accused him of having nothing going on in his life, but it’s obvious that this is only a temporary engagement for him.

Unbelievably, it would seem Iakov *does* have something to get back to.

“What have you been doing since Spearcrest?” I ask him, completely on impulse. “And do you want—I don’t know. A



cup of coffee?”

He nods. I put on the coffee machine, turning my back to him as he answers.

“Not much. Same as ever. Working for my dad.”

“You’re going into the family business?”

“No.” Iakov’s laughter is cold and dull, it presses into the back of me like the blunt edge of a useless blade. “You’re a historian, right? You know bastards don’t inherit thrones.”

For all the times I called him a bastard, this is my first time hearing Iakov is one. I turn to frown at him over my shoulder, but he looks unruffled and unbothered.

The idea of it makes my stomach twist because it explains his relationship with his father. I think about the way Theodora’s father treated her—his legitimate and only daughter—and then I think about Iakov, his father’s illegitimate son. His battered clothes and the shitty flat he used to live in all begin to make sense.

I don’t say any of that. Instead, I turn around with his coffee and hand it to him. “They do, actually. All the time. History is full of bastard heirs.”

He takes the cup and shrugs. “If you say so.”

“Why work for your father if you don’t get anything out of it?”

“Because it’s so much fun,” Iakov deadpans.

I grimace. “Oh, of course. I forgot you were so very witty.”

He sips the coffee, and even though it must still be piping hot, he doesn't flinch. "Ask dumb questions, get dumb answers."

"Rich of you to call anyone dumb."

"Yea."

He shrugs, not like he doesn't care about my insult because it's not true, but more like my insult is just stating a truth he doesn't care about. It makes me feel horrible and I'm forced to look away for a second.

"You gonna give me your guy list?" he asks. "So I can start looking into them?"

I ignore the question. "Where do you live now? Are you still in Russia?"

I don't ask him about his horrible flat, but I don't need to. A split-second frown crosses his face, then he says, "I'm still living in that flat."

"In St Petersburg?"

"No, Moscow."

"Did you go to university?"

"What for?"

I roll my eyes. "To *study*."

He gives a sudden smile, flashing white teeth. He looks like a wolf when he smiles, almost intimidating. "Aren't I too dumb for shit like that?"

I stare at him, my breath caught in my throat. I realise all of a sudden, horribly and objectively, that Iakov *is* handsome. Not the handsomeness of his and Zach's other friends, like the dreamy French aristocrat Séverin Montcroix or the golden-haired Evan Knight with the dimples and the sun-kissed abs.

Iakov's handsomeness is that beauty you find in wolves or lynxes. A deadly grace, an instinct for survival completely removed from emotion, an innate strength that's pure and primal.

The thought fills me with disgust. I reel from it like it's a physical presence, stepping away from the kitchen island. Grabbing my glass, I set it into the sink.

"Well, it's nice to see that you've been putting your life to great use," I sneer. "All those years—and *so* much to show for it. What an impressive man you are."

He gives me the wolfish grin again. "Didn't realise I was here to impress you."

"No, you're right about that. You're just here to be a thorn in my side."

"Yea." He laughs. "Stole your gig, *Kolyuchka*."

"Oh, fuck you." I turn and stop in the doorway, turning back to add, "And stop calling me that. I hope you *don't* have a good night, and I hope you sleep like shit, and tomorrow, I hope you have a terrible day, and then I hope you find the guy you're looking for and fuck off back to Russia and I never have to see your face again."

He laughs like a bark. “Wanna slap my face to boot?”

“Slapping you would require touching you, and your stupidity might be contagious.”

He doesn't say anything, just gives me a thoughtful look as he finishes his cup of coffee. Then, in a slow, deliberate move, he swipes his thumb across his lips. Without meaning to, my eyes drop to his mouth to watch the movement, and the forbidden memory explodes in my mind.

A kiss that should never have happened. A kiss that will never happen again.

I turn around and leave without another word.

Cerberus

## Iakov

IN THE GUEST BEDROOM, I sit on the edge of the bed and check my phone. A bunch of texts from Zach asking if everything is going well, if Zaro is being polite, thanking me for the hundredth time and asking me to tell him immediately if Zaro does anything crazy or reckless or ruthless. I laugh and scroll past.

Two texts from Anton, one asking me how it's going with the journos, the other sent a few hours ago and asking where I am. That tells me two things. One, Anton knows I've not checked into the hotel. Two: my father is trying to have me monitored.

Finally, there's a text from an unknown number.

**Unknown:** Welcome back to London, Knuckles.

Looks like my father's not the only one keeping track.

I lock my phone, toss it on the bed, and grab a pack of cigarettes. There's a narrow balcony outside the window; I step out there to smoke. Below, the street is quiet, the trees rustling in the wind. Everything around here is clean and well-lit and full of greenery. Not the London I'm used to—Zahara Blackwood's London.

I light my cigarette and scratch my knuckles, thinking of the conversation in the kitchen. This fucking girl. She's beautiful as anything but fuck me is she thorny. There's no chance I'm

getting out of here without being torn to bloody ribbons. Just another reason to get my job here done and fast.

I finish my cigarette, take a shower, then lie on the bed. No matter how elegant the room is, how quiet it is outside or how soft the blanket and pillows are, sleep is long in coming.

It always is.

“Fuck,” I mutter when I check the time on my phone.

It’s only one in the morning; I won’t be sleeping for the next few hours at least. There’s no TV to blink numbly at, no video game to focus on until my eyes start to burn. I groan and roll upright, sitting on the edge of the bed.

I rub my palms hard into my burning eyes, sending a burst of white stars through my head. Looking around, I catch a glimpse of the book corner sticking out of my bag. Plato’s *Republic*. With a grim sigh, I grab the book, drop back onto the bed, and get reading.



I’M STARTLED AWAKE BY the sound of a banging door. For a split second, my heart races and my adrenaline spikes. I’m twelve again, in the flat in Yalinka, with my father about to crash through the front door.

But when I open my eyes, I'm slumped on my stomach at the foot of the bed in the guest bedroom of Zahara's flat. Pushing myself up, I stand and get dressed. I have a banging headache and my eyes hurt.

I leave the guest bedroom to find the flat empty. On the marble countertop is a note written in perfect, looping cursive.

*Dear Fido,*

*I'll be at university. Don't ask Zach for my number; don't call me, don't text me. Don't even formulate my name with whatever fraction of brain matter you have inside your thick skull. Below is the list you asked for: get on with your job and get the fuck out of my life.*

*Sincerely up yours,*

*Zahara Blackwood.*

"Thorny fuck," I say to myself.

Raiding Zahara's fridge and cupboards for breakfast yields nothing except expensive booze, a box of biscuits, and a jar of Maraschino cherries. I swallow a mouthful of the cherries and wash it down with a gulp of Macallan whisky, which tastes like shit and doesn't strike me as being to Zahara's taste. Then I make a coffee and have a look at Zahara's list of shitty men.

I only recognise two names. The Duke of Bridehall and Erik Mattner.

The Duke of Bridehall, because he's the kind of upper-class British bastard to always be splashed all over tabloids and



social media for being involved in the kind of sex scandals only exceptionally rich men get away with.

Erik Mattner, because several years ago, he swung a fist at my face and I beat him to a bloody pulp.

Back then, Zahara was sixteen years old and he was trying to take her back to his hotel room. I let it slide the first couple of times he suggested it until it became clear he was being serious. The bloodlust set in. I beat him until he slumped like a rag doll and I tried to throw him into the Thames.

Zahara stopped me. She was so angry that night. Angry at Erik, for inviting her to his hotel even though he knew she was still in school, then angry at me for trying to stop her from going with him. Most of all, angry at Zach for seeking to protect her from exactly the kind of spiteful mistake she was trying to make.

I would have killed Erik Mattner that night if she hadn't stopped me.

My instincts must have been right if he's on this list.

I swallow a too-hot mouthful of coffee and pull up everything I possibly can about Mattner. His story is the same as every guy his type. Crypto-bro, made it big in tech, now hangs out with all the dirty billionaires of the world. Mattner is filthy fucking rich, but he's not the type of rich guy he *thinks* he is.

Mattner is new money *so* new it's still wrapped in plastic. His clothes are loud with designer labels, and he collects the

most expensive things he can think of like trophies. Cars, watches, historical artefacts he has no business collecting.

Mattner likes the sound of his own voice. There are hundreds of clips of him on the internet, snippets from interviews where he fills the air with the sound of his voice.

His words are all jargon, no meaning. No depth. He talks about the stock market like it's a video game, about money like it's pixel coins, and people like they're NPCs. Every sentence he speaks sounds like it's been generated by AI.

I scroll through the hundreds of photos on his social media pages, slowly crawling back through the years. When I find what I'm looking for, I clench my fist around my cup of coffee and feel the ceramic crack.

The post I've found dates back almost three years. Zahara would have been around eighteen then.

She *looks* eighteen. In the picture, she and Mattner are in a club. She's holding a glass up and smiling a diamond smile. He's standing next to her, one arm wrapped possessively around her shoulder. There's a massive ring on his little finger, which makes him look like a parody of a pimp. His face is turned towards Zahara, his nose and mouth buried in her hair, which she's wearing in long brown braids.

She looks young as fuck—far too young to be hanging out with scum like him—but she has this expression on her face like she's completely certain of herself. A mask, a lie.

The truth hides in Zahara's eyes. That heart-wrenching pool of sadness, a gaping nothing where the hunger inside her lives unfulfilled.

Mattner posted the picture with the caption, "*I got 99 problems but a duchess ain't one.*"

Fucking clown.

Next time I see him, it's gonna be an honour to become this fuckwit's hundredth problem.



JUST AS ZACH PROMISED, my bike waits for me outside Zahara's apartment building. I run my hand over the side of it, greeting it like an old friend. It was my first bike—it *feels* like an old friend. I set off straight away, through a bleak grey sheet of rain.

Driving through London is a notorious nightmare; driving a *bike* through London in the rain is just flirting with suicide. Luckily, death and I are old friends, and the familiar spike of adrenaline rushes through me as I speed through the city to its outskirts, where all the billionaires have their made-to-order homes.

An hour later, I come to a stop at the end of a long, winding road. I press the intercom buzzer and the black gate slides

open as if I'm expected here, even though I didn't tell a soul I was coming. I follow a gravel road through an expanse of greenery.

In the middle of it is an enormous house of glass and steel. An imposing fortress of a building even an inferno couldn't damage.

A fitting home for the devil himself.

I shove my boot into the kickstand and leave my bike at the foot of a set of clean stone steps. The door opens before I even get to the first step, and a black shadow flies out, followed by another. Two black Dobermans, half my size and probably twice as strong, bound down the steps, circling me.

A third one appears but doesn't move, watching me from the top of the steps.

"Cerberus," a voice drawls. "Heel."

The dogs spring away from me and back up the steps. In the door, dressed simply in black slacks and a white shirt, is a man I haven't seen since I left Spearcrest. A man I was hoping I wouldn't have to see again in a long fucking time.

"Which one of them is Cerberus?" I ask, looking up into pallid eyes and a face shaped like a knife.

Luca Fletcher-Lowe smirks. "All of them."

# Killer Instinct

## **Iakov**

LUCA LOOKS GOOD, ACTUALLY.

Back in Spearcrest, he was always slim and wiry from fencing and archery. He was too good for the gym, too good for runs. I never once saw him pick up anything heavier than his phone. And he had health problems too, although he tried to keep those a secret. He was as skinny and pale and sick as an inbred European prince.

But he's filled out since he left Spearcrest. There's colour in his face and hints of muscles under his shirt. His hair, pale like bone, is slicked back; every part of him is impeccably groomed.

Looks like a life of being a total creep is working out for him.

He leads me into his house, his three black dogs tailing us, and takes me into a huge living room. The floor-to-ceiling windows overlook a green lawn cut almost as short and severe as my hair. Beyond it, a tangle of trees shakes under a hard grey sky.

Inside, everything is sparse, clean, clinical. Dark wood and glass, pale leather, black marble flagstones. An orchid in a square white pot, minimalist art on the walls. An enormous black fireplace set into a wall of exposed concrete. There isn't a hint of personality or colour in the place. It's a box designed

by a soulless machine, inhabited by one. It feels cold, inhospitable, isolated.

Like a prison.

But Luca seems quite at ease as he goes to a glass bar and pours us drinks. He glances at me.

“Straight vodka?” he asks.

He pronounces vodka “*vod-kaaah*”.

I forgot how posh he sounds, his words drawn out in lazy, drawling syllables, almost nasal.

“Yea.”

He cocks a pale eyebrow. “Still, old boy?”

“I’m a man of habit.”

He gives a dry laugh. “But not today—since you’re here to see me.”

Luca doesn’t need to say what he wants to say: that he knows exactly how many times I’ve been back to England since we all left Spearcrest, that he’s kept track of every visit I’ve made, that he also knows about my brief visits to Japan to see Sev and his Anaïs. Once, I met Evan and his girl Sophie in London for some drinks, and the waiter at the restaurant brought us a bottle of their most expensive wine, courtesy of Mr Fletcher-Lowe.

Luca *wants* us to know he’s keeping tabs.

I shrug and jab my chin in his direction. “Give me whatever you’re having.”

He pours two drinks from a bottle I'm sure is worth more than my entire existence. He hands me a glass, and we take seats on his angular leather couches, staring at each other across a glass table bigger than a coffin.

“Well, and how have you been, Knuckles?” he asks, swirling his drink and smirking at me over the rim of his glass.

“You tell me, Fletch.”

Luca lets out a satisfied laugh. Laughter doesn't sound normal coming from his throat, it never has. It comes out scornful and insincere, cold like cracking ice.

“By the sounds of it,” he says, “you've been doing a lot of hitting skulls together for your dad and his dodgy friend, hiding in your bachelor pad in Chertanovo, and you've hit a dead end in your little quest.” His grin widens, but his mouth looks about as much like a smile as a knife does. “How far off am I?”

“Not far off,” I tell him. “You didn't even mention what video game I've been playing or the colour of my boxers.”

He smirks. “Probably some dragon fucking game and probably black.”

“You know me so well.”

“You're just about as predictable as crooked dice.”

I sit back and prop my foot over one knee. Might as well get comfortable; I'm not getting what I came for without negotiating for it. “Since I'm so predictable, are you gonna tell me why I'm here?”



“I’m guessing you’re here to make a deal with the devil.” Luca looks at me fixedly, barely blinking. “Whatever you’ve been looking for, you tried to keep your hands as clean as possible, but now you’re ready to get them a little dirty.”

“They’ve *been* dirty,” I tell him. “They stay dirty. You know what I’ve been up to. Nothing clean about any of it.”

“No, certainly. You’ve done what you’ve needed to do, Kav—and don’t you always. But you’ve got your code of honour, still.” He takes a sip of his drink and swallows with a straight face without so much as a grimace. “You’re a man with a code, Kav. I like that about you. That’s why you were always my secret favourite.”

“Fucking liar.” It’s my turn to laugh. I didn’t expect him to be in such a good mood. “You didn’t like any of us, Fletch. Not for one second.”

“No? Do you think I hung out with you whiny fuckwits because I so enjoyed being made privy to all your petty little problems? Blackwood and his pissing contest Apostles programme, Evan and his blue balls?”

“Nah. You hung out with us fuckwits because you were bored and curious.” I put my glass down on the table, ignoring the black leather coasters. The unpleasant crunch of glass on glass is grating but Luca doesn’t react. “You’re still keeping tabs on us for that same reason.”

“Keeping *tabs*?” Luca says with false outrage.

“Yea.” I prop my elbows on my knees and crack my knuckles. I grin at him. “You keep tabs, man. You try to find out everything you can. You spy like a dirty little creep behind a peephole. Bet you can’t get enough of it.”

He doesn’t take offence. I’ve never seen a single insult ever land on Luca. You could probably spit in his face and he’d have nothing more to give you than a mocking smirk.

“It’s more interesting than TV,” he tells me with a mild shrug.

I watch him, his body language. His arm is draped over the back of his couch, his ankle propped on his knee. He seems comfortable, at ease. Back in Spearcrest, he was always furtive, nervy, on edge, bouncing a leg and tapping his fingers. Back then, he looked like he was always balancing on the edge of a razor.

Luca might be *visibly* calmer, but that edge is still there. Except that instead of balancing on the razor, he’s just become the blade.

And that’s why I’ve come here, like a video game character entering the monster’s den. I’ve come to retrieve the weapon I need to complete the quest. Except that Luca is the monster *and* the weapon.



“WHO IS IT YOU’RE looking for anyway?” he asks, putting an abrupt end to the small chat.

Time to talk business. I’m ready for this.

“A girl. Yelena Orlova.”

“So that’s who you went to that St Petersburg school to find?” says Luca, happy with yet another display of just how much he’s been keeping tabs. “Got yourself a schoolgirl for a girlfriend, Kav?”

“No.”

“Ah,” he says. His eyes narrow. His eyelashes are pale, they catch the light like he’s got flecks of silver in his eyes. He slowly lowers his glass, setting it down on a coaster. “Didn’t have you down as a family man, Kav.”

“I’m not.”

“*But.*” He says it like a question.

I would have preferred to give Luca a name and nothing more, but my expectations were low in that regard. I watch him. If I tell Luca about Lena, what are the odds of it coming back to bite me in the arse?

High odds, knowing Luca. But my odds of finding Lena on my own are now down to zero. I can’t do it from the inside, in Russia, where my father’s shadow seems to block every pathway and silence every mouth.

So what choice do I have?

I didn't trust Danyl and I still worked with him—out of desperation. Luca is a different beast from Danyl, but I'm more desperate now.

“She's my half-sister,” I tell Luca. “Lost track of her when I was twelve. She was ten. Not seen her since.”

“Your papa's keeping her locked in a tower, huh?”

“Something like that.”

“Right. And what did the St Petersburg school say?”

I throw him a look. “Thought you'd know, since you know everything.”

“I don't know what the school told you,” Luca says with a smile, “only that it made you miserable.”

“She wasn't on file.”

“Interesting. Do you think you were given bullshit info?”

It's a good question, one I've considered many times since leaving St Petersburg. “Not on purpose. Maybe.”

“Hm.” Luca tilts his head and runs his tongue along his pristine white teeth. “So... what? You think your darling papa scrubbed her off the school records?”

I hesitate. “Something like that. He's done it before.” I wave a hand. “He likes to make people, uh—*disappear*.”

“I've heard.”

I've walked into the mouth of hell, into the castle of steel and brimstone, and told the devil everything I know. Time to

put my pride aside and beg like the dog Zahara Blackwood knows me to be.

“I need your help, Fletch,” I say. “Please.”

“Certainly. Of course. How could I not help a dear old friend?” There’s a delighted glint in his eyes. And in Luca, delight and danger are the same colour. Grey. “But I wouldn’t say no to a courteous little exchange of favours.”

“I’m not killing anyone for you.”

Luca laughs. His dogs stand behind him, lined up in front of the window. Three black shadows for one crooked devil.

“My enemies don’t deserve death,” Luca says. “Death isn’t a punishment—it’s a reward.”

We watch one another. I don’t know that I disagree with him—I don’t know what that says about me. But I know what I’m willing to do, and what I’m not.

“What do you want?” I ask.

“Don’t get me wrong, Knuckles, I do appreciate your particular affinity for the art of violence. But I need to use a different skill set of yours.” Luca stands and walks to a black lacquered cabinet. “Remember the favour you did for Bishop Blackwood back in school?”

A cold sensation slithers through me like a river icing over.

“What do you mean?”

“Blackwood snuck his wayward sister into Spearcrest and made you spy on her. Remember that?”

My mind races. Does he know why I'm in London? Does he know about Zahara's situation? For the first time since I arrived in Luca's fortress of glass and steel, my adrenaline spikes. I crack my knuckles, loosening my fingers. I don't want to batter Luca in his own house but I'll do what I need to do.

"I kept an eye on her for a bit, yea." My eyes move from Luca to his dogs. Will they tear me to shreds if I make a step towards him? He doesn't seem worried. His back is turned to me as he searches for something.

"I need you to do something like that for me," Luca says.

My fingers uncurl, my shoulders relax a fraction.

He turns back to me, a white envelope in hand. The cabinet closes quietly behind him. He sits down and slides the envelope across the table. I pick it up.

"Your little army of spies and hackers failing you?"

"I'm hunting a particularly slippery hare." He smirks. "The dogs and foxes can't keep up. This one calls for an apex predator. A wolf with"—he clicks his teeth—"killer instinct."

Luca is smarter than he looks. Bringing up Zahara wasn't just to remind me of the past jobs on my CV. It was to remind me that he knows the places in my life I want him to keep away from.

But it's fine. So long as he stays away from Zachary and his family, I'll play. I know what I'm capable of if he tries to fuck with me—I think he knows too.

I pour out the contents of the envelope across the glass table. Blurry photographs, dated and timed screenshots from club and hotel security footage, scanned copies of a bunch of passports and driver's licences. All of those images have the same person in them.

A girl—no. A young woman. She could be anywhere between twenty and thirty. Her hair, clothes and makeup are different in each picture, but there are a couple of constants. How lean she is, how big and dark her eyes are, ink spills on a white sheet.

“Who's this?” I ask, flicking through the passport copies.

They all have her face on them, carved cheeks and big inky eyes, but each has a different name.

Sasha Taylor.

Elizabeth Jones.

Caroline Faulkner.

“For now, just a shadow,” Luca says. “That's why I need your help.”

He's watching me closely. His body language is completely relaxed, and the smug smirk is still on his face.

But he's tapping the back of his couch with two fingers, slightly, softly—without noticing.

Luca knows I came here with something I really want. I was afraid that would make me too weak, tip the balance too far on his side.

Looks like I'm in luck, though. Because Luca has something *he* really wants too.



# Silk & Steel

## Zahara

IN THE MORNING, I leave the house in the foulest of moods.

After that, the day just gets worse.

We're two months into the term, and university is starting to feel hard. Like I don't have enough of my mind with the stalker and Iakov invading my home, I also have to balance my time between lectures and seminars and tutorials, essays and reading and research for my dissertation. I'm supposed to be brainstorming a dissertation topic, but my mind is a cluttered mess at the moment.

Studying is always hard work, but these days more than ever.

To make things worse, James is back in town after spending a week abroad. Two months into our relationship—or is it our affair? Or is it even anything at all?—and I already dread seeing him.

He offers to take me to dinner, and since that doesn't sound so bad, I agree. He's not terrible company when we're in public. He's well-connected, well-spoken, and knowledgeable about art and history, which I enjoy discussing.

All it takes to ruin everything is the look he gives me when he picks me up outside of my campus library. His eyes move up and down the length of me. He sees my plaid skirt, my woolly beret, my shiny loafers, and this seems enough to send him into a heightened state.

He doesn't even ask me for permission before he tells the driver to take us straight back to his hotel. He just gives me a knowing wink and says we'll order room service. My mind scrambles for a lie to tell him to get out of going back to his hotel with him, but then he puts his hand around my waist and whispers in my ear.

“I've missed you so much.”

It makes my heart ache to hear it. Because even though it's just the sex James misses, not me, it still feels good to hear it. I close my eyes and let him whisper sweet nothings in my ear while he reaches under my coat, and it's not what I need but it's the closest I'm going to get. So I take it.

And then it's just another rerun of the same play. The excitement of kissing in the hotel lift, almost enough to make me feel something but not quite. James's breath hitching when he closes the hotel room door on us, the beading sweat on his forehead when he pushes me down to the bed and slides down my tights and panties. His grunts while he pumps into me, like a hungry boar. Holding on to the bedsheets and counting his thrusts, timing my fake moans to make this end as soon as possible.

When he comes, he slumps on top of me and gurgles in my ear, “God. You're so fucking beautiful.”

The memory of Iakov flashes in my mind, uninvited. Iakov all those years ago, with my Chanel umbrella in his hand, his dark gaze resting on me, his words the edge of a blade pressing against my heart.

*Beautiful like a rose. Thorns all over.*

Behind me, James straightens himself, gets rid of his condom and zips himself back up. I lie on the bed, frozen in disgust and anger, not even sure who I'm disgusted with or angry at.

What would *he* say if he saw me like this?

Iakov fucking Kavinski, with his empty eyes and his shitty buzz cut and his silent judgement. What would he say if he saw me lying on this hotel bed with my arse in the air and a man old enough to be my father zipping himself up behind me?

I picture his dark eyes, watching me while James fucks me. There's a horrible feeling in the pit of my stomach like my insides collapsing in on themselves—like I'm thinking about something forbidden and fucked-up. I push myself off the bed and quickly pull my underwear and tights back on. My heart is beating too hard in my chest, making me feel almost nauseous.

*What am I doing?* I ask myself. *What the fuck am I doing?*



I RETURN HOME DEFEATED, disgusted, hungry, angry and on edge.

Even though I took a boiling hot shower in the hotel bathroom and sprayed perfume all over myself, the smell of James still feels stuck to me. My gut squirms with the paranoid fear that Iakov will be able to tell I had gross hotel sex.

Why should I give a shit what he thinks? I angrily pace the tiny length of the lift on my way up to my apartment, glaring at my reflection in the mirrored wall. I don't owe him anything. Who is he to judge anyway?

Before I can stop myself, I'm making up arguments in my head, an entire arsenal of sharp repartees.

*I never asked for you to be here, so why should I answer to you?*

*You're here to catch my stalker and stop him from hurting me, everything else is none of your business.*

*Why should I care what you think about me? You have literally nothing better to do in your life than solve your high school best friend's little sister's problems.*

By the time I get into my flat, my exterior is cool as ice and my insides are burning with fury. I'm ready to verbally assassinate the bastard should he so much as blink at me wrong.

Except that he's not there.

"Fido?" I call, looking through the flat. "Fido. Iakov?"

There's an empty coffee cup in the sink, but that's the only sign of his presence. He's nowhere to be found.

“For fuck’s sake,” I bite out.

If the stalker turns up while he’s gone, I hope my death ruins Iakov Kavinski’s day.



ONCE I’M A LITTLE calmer—after a bubble bath, some food and a glass of chilled white wine—I go into the guest bedroom and make a thorough examination of Iakov’s possessions.

After all, why not? He’s in *my* home, sleeping in *my* guest bed and drinking *my* coffee. I’m owed *something*.

The bed is unmade, the blinds are still down, and the room smells of cigarettes, petrol and his deodorant. His big duffel bag lies on the floor, gutted open.

I pull the blankets over the bed, careful not to sit with my bare thighs on his bed sheets. It’s already bad enough that the thought of him infiltrated my mind post-coitus. I’m not going to further ruin sex for myself by making indirect skin-on-skin contact.

The bedside table—an antique side table I had refurbished and then varnished—is a cluttered mess now. The lamp is pushed aside to make room for an enormous book, some tangled-up charger wires and a half-crumpled packet of

cigarettes. With a wince of distaste, I pick up the book and glance at the title.

*Plato's Republic.*

As if. I toss the book down on the bed with a sneer. There's no chance Iakov is reading that. I doubt he could even read the first line out loud without stuttering like a ten-year-old in a remedial English class. He probably uses the book exclusively to bash people's heads in like the vulgar hooligan he is.

Pulling his bag closer to the bed, I rifle through it, tossing his things this way and that. It's not like he cares about keeping *my* guest room orderly, so why should I keep *his* things tidy? Besides, I want him to know I was looking through his stuff.

His bag doesn't exactly yield surprises. There are some clothes—black T-shirts, black jeans, identical black caps and beanies, black boxers, some socks and a big grey sweatshirt (I suppose the one he reserves for dates and special occasions). The man doesn't own a single item of clothing of any colour on the rainbow. What a fucking bore.

Tossed in haphazardly amongst the clothes, there's an electric razor, aftershave, crudely rolled-up boxing hand wraps that reek of sweat. I shove them away with a grimace of disgust. Something metallic flashes at the bottom of the bag.

I pick it up. A switchblade with a black handle. I lick my lips and try to flick it open. It works after a few tries.

The blade is immaculately clean; it catches the light like a mirror. It sends a sinking feeling through my stomach, like

nerves or anxiety. But something else, too, a sort of thrill that makes my breath catch, like driving a car a little faster than is safe.

I let myself fall back onto the bed, my hair spreading out over the pillows. Holding the knife up, I tilt the blade so it catches the light. Holding up my other hand, I slide the edge of the blade along the length of my arm, from wrist to elbow. The contrast between my warm brown skin and the cold pale metal is mesmerising.

A shiver skitters up my back. I'm wearing nothing aside from my tiny pyjama set in champagne silk. The ruffled shorts and cropped camisole are doing little to keep me warm, but it's not the cold that's making me shiver.

It's not the cold that's making my breath catch and my nipples suddenly hard. And maybe it's not even just the blade.

There's a knock on the front door and I bolt upright like I've been caught in a crime. I close the switchblade, grab my glass of wine and hurtle out of the guest room and into my bedroom. Pulling open one of my drawers, I throw the switchblade under a pile of lingerie, burying the black handle under layers of lace and satin.

I wait for a moment, just to catch my breath, before I check the peephole. Relief rushes over me like a cooling breeze when I spot Rhiannon's and Sanvi's faces, squashed together as Rhiannon holds up a bottle of wine in front of the peephole.

"Let us in, troublemaker!" Rhiannon hollers, obnoxiously loud. "We've got updates on the investigation!"



# Little Miss Blackmail

## Iakov

LUCA HAS AN OFFICE in his house that's somehow creepier than his cold dead eyes, his three identical dogs, and all the creepy shit he did and said back in Spearcrest.

Blinds down on every window, dim lights, a massive black desk, a row of high-resolution monitors. One wall is entirely covered by filing cabinets, all with locks on. Another wall has a whiteboard covered in photographs and names and scribbled notes like he's a disgraced detective who's lost his mind.

Guess it takes time, effort, paperwork and a ton of screens to amass the amount of information Luca's been hoarding over the years. I'd be impressed if it wasn't so damn sinister.

"You need to go out more, man," I say, looking around at his setup.

He sinks into a desk chair with a dry laugh. "Are you asking me out on a date?"

"Sadistic fuck like you? No thanks. Don't wanna end up tied up in your basement."

Luca snorts. "You *wish* I tied you up in my basement, Kav. You like pain more than any fucker I've ever met."

He types something into the blue and white lines of codes on his screens, clicks around. CCTV footage pops up, showing the glossy booths of a crowded club.

I cross my arms and frown at the screen. "What's this?"

“This is footage from CHOKE, one of my clubs in Soho.” Luca points at a man sitting in one of the booths, and I lean forward to get a better look at him. “Know him?”

Pudgy guy, receding hairline, chunky watch. He could be any rich fucker in London. “Some millionaire Brit or something?”

“That’s Oswald Forrenham.” Luca looks at me, and when I don’t give him the reaction he expects, he gives an annoyed tut and adds, “You might know him as the man who owns the biggest media conglomerate in the United Kingdom?”

I shrug. “I don’t watch the news.”

“That explains a lot.” He shakes his head. “All you need to know is that he’s a very important patron of mine.”

“Right. So what, you tryna kidnap his daughter or something?”

Luca lets out another dry laugh and looks at me. “You’re a funny guy. I forgot.”

“A barrel of laughs.”

“I’m drowning in tears of laughter. Now watch.”

Luca types something and the footage zooms in, losing quality as it does. We both draw closer to the monitor, where a girl has just entered the frame. From the back, all I can see is a slinky dress in a light colour, pale, slim arms, and long blonde hair.

There's a short conversation, and the other men scam, leaving Big Oswald alone with the girl. She slides into the booth, and I get a better view of her.

Small, heart-shaped face and big inky eyes that take up too much space.

The woman from the photos.

Luca says nothing, and we watch on fast forward as she inches closer and closer to the media mogul, until she's practically straddling his lap. Finally, she whispers something in his ear and they both leave the booth. A couple of security details follow them out of the club, and then Luca stops the footage with a harsh tap on his keyboard.

“That night, Oswald Forrenham lost his wallet, his keycard, even his goddamn fucking suit. The next morning, he was found tied and gagged in his hotel room. The hotel staff had to cut him loose.”

“You know all that, huh?”

“I make it my business to know what goes on in my patrons' lives, Kav.”

“Right, so—what? He's asked you to find out who this girl is so he can get his wallet back?”

“No.”

Luca turns back to the monitor, types, and more footage pops up. Same club, different night, different pudgy fuck in an ill-fitting suit.

“You might know this one,” Luca says.

I peer closer. I recognise the face but only vaguely. “My dad doesn’t fuck with OPG.”

“Sure—no. He just sells them firearms, right? Whatever. At least we’ve established this girl’s not your dad, right?”

I don’t respond to his sarcasm—guess it’s easy to fall back into our Spearcrest dynamics. Besides, he’s tapping the screen again, his back stiffening.

And sure enough, a girl comes into frame. This time, she’s in a tight black dress with long sleeves and a tiny skirt fringed with red crystals. Her hair is a sharp, short black bob that shines with every movement. She pulls the same moves—sliding into the booth, leaning into her target, running a flirtatious finger along the rim of his glass. They leave together soon after.

More footage—each time a different man, a different look, each time the same girl, same MO.

“What’s she up to?” I ask, frowning at Luca.

“Running a blackmail racket out of my club.”

There’s no emotion in Luca’s voice, but it’s the void that’s dangerous with him.

This girl, as bold and fearless and self-assured as she seems in all that footage, is fucking with the wrong guy, and she doesn’t even know it.

“Why your club?” I ask.

He doesn't even try to gracefully dodge the question.

“That’s not for you to worry about. You just need to help me catch her.”

His eyes are fixed on the screen, which is paused on a shot of the girl. She’s laughing over her shoulder at whichever man is following her out of the club. It’s hard to tell how genuine her laughter is—it’s hard to tell much of anything about the enigma with the inky eyes.

Luca’s face is a lot easier to read.

His eyes are empty, his lips in a straight line. He’s not looking at her like he hates her. He’s not angry, or even annoyed.

He’s looking at her like she’s prey. Nothing less—nothing more.

If I find this woman, and Luca hurts her, he won’t hurt her for vengeance, or as a warning, or even as a punishment. He’ll hurt her because he wants to, because he can. Luca already had a sadistic streak back in Spearcrest—I don’t even want to imagine how his tastes have evolved since.

“If you haven’t been able to find her,” I say, “what makes you think I can?”

“Because you’ve a nose like a dog, Kav.” Luca tears his eyes away from the woman on the screen and looks up at me. “All I need is for you to follow her home after she pulls one of her stunts. Track her back to whatever hole she’s crawled out of.”

“That easy, huh?” I ask drily. “You don’t think she’ll try to make it a bit difficult?”

“Oh, yes. If she was easy prey, I wouldn’t need an apex predator, though, would I?”

“Does she know you’re onto her?”

“She knows.”

“How?”

Luca’s eyelids droop, half-covering his grey pupils. His words fall from his mouth, dull and dark.

“Because the crazy little bitch tried pulling her con on me.”



I LEAVE FORTRESS FLETCH just as night begins to fall. He’s given me the address to his club, a map with the best vantage points to the club doors, the names of the hotels his patrons went back to before the little ink-eyed thief ran her blackmail scheme on them and any information he thought might help.

“She usually crawls out of the shadows once every few months, so I have no doubt she’ll show her face sometime soon,” Luca says to me as he walks me to the door. “Keep your phone on you and I’ll let you know when she shows up.”

You get me Little Miss Blackmail, Kav, and I'll find your sister. I swear it."

His eyes still have the same disturbing emptiness as they did back when we were younger. The years have changed him, but that nothingness inside him is still the same.

A silver archer; hollow metal animated by some evil force.

"I won't find her just so you can hurt her," I tell him before leaving.

Luca cracks into a harsh cackle. "Still playing white knight to broken girls, Kav?"

I look him dead in the eyes. "Only shit-sucking scum hurt women."

Far from looking offended, he smirks. "Trust me, Kav, some women love the pain."

"Is that what you tell yourself so you can still get off?"

"Quite the opposite, Kav."

I leave his house without making any promises; Luca doesn't push for one. That surprises me. When I get to my bike at the foot of the stairs, I look back up. At the top of the stairs, the three black dogs sit completely still, watching me with their eyes glowing pale green in the shadows. Luca's gone.

He's letting me leave without promises because he doesn't need a promise from me. He knows I'll do what he asks.

I guess that's what you get for seeking help from the devil. Whether or not you're willing to take the deal, the devil



always knows you were desperate enough to go to him in the first place.



THE WIND HAS PICKED up and a cold rain is slashing down by the time I get back to Zahara's flat. The night has long since fallen, but I had to buy some stuff before heading home. Booze, books, free weights, a jump rope and sleeves of cigs—all designed to help me through the long, sleepless nights.

I consider buying a basic gaming setup—just a screen and console—and some games, but Zahara would probably take great joy in tossing them out of her window anyway. Instead, I grab some food for her, since she seems to be sustaining herself on nothing but alcohol and sweets. I get her a box of macarons too, since those are her favourites, and she's been going through a shit time, so why not, right?

The flat is noisy with voices when I get in. I find Zahara sitting at the kitchen island with two other girls. Food and glasses of wine crowd the marble top of the kitchen island, and all three girls look up when I walk in.

Zahara's face drops almost instantly. The other two girls stare at me as if a grizzly bear's just appeared in the middle of Knightsbridge.

“You could have given me some sort of heads-up you were on the way back,” Zahara says in a frosty tone.

“Don’t have your number,” I tell her.

“And you’re not getting it. I changed it *specifically* so that we would never need to be in touch ever again.”

“Right,” I say.

“Hi, Iakov,” one of the girls says with a little wave. She’s slight and graceful, with silky black hair and a warm smile. Sanvi Dayal, a friend of Zahara’s I’ve met several times now.

“Hi, Sanvi.”

The other sticks her hand out abruptly and says, “Hi? I’m Rhiannon.”

She’s got red hair and glasses with thick frames. She’s wearing a green quilted jacket, baggy jeans and Converse. She’s different from Zahara and the other girl. I can always recognise people who aren’t from money and they can always recognise me, like two impostors spotting each other.

“Hi. Iakov.”

I put down my bags and take her hand. She gives me a handshake like she’s trying to crush my palm. It doesn’t get her far, and I watch her placidly until she tires herself out. She gives me a nod like a sportsman acknowledging another.

“Don’t bother introducing yourself to him,” Zahara mutters against the rim of her glass. “He’ll be gone by next week if

I'm lucky, and then hopefully we never have to see him ever again."

"Zahara, don't be so shocking!" Sanvi says, shaking her head. "He's just here to help."

"I have all the help I need from you two." Zahara's glare suddenly disappears under a cruel smile. "This is why you entrust this kind of task to intelligent people, not idiot brawlers."

"The mood you're in, Zaro—Jesus!" Rhiannon says, stifling a shocked laugh. "Let the guy breathe."

"You guys have some suspects?" I ask, turning to Sanvi, who seems to be the most reasonable out of the three and the least under the influence of white wine and prosecco.

"We have compiled a *profile*," Sanvi says. She points at one of the stools. "Come sit with us. Would you like a drink?"

"He doesn't drink wine," Zahara says. "He only drinks straight vodka. Like a *hooligan*."

"A hooligan," Rhiannon repeats, almost spitting out her drink. "What are you, eighty?"

"A—a hooligan," Zahara says, stumbling a little. "You know—a thug. You have hooligans in Ireland, or...?"

"We'll work better if we all work together," Sanvi says diplomatically. "No point splitting forces."

I don't sit, but I stand next to Zahara at the kitchen island, leaning forward to rest my elbows on the countertop. My

shoulder brushes against hers, and she turns to throw me a glare. I reach into my jacket pocket and hand her the box of macarons. She narrows her eyes like she doesn't accept the gesture—but she does take the box.

# Cruel Mistress

## Zahara

THE MACARONS ARE A nice touch, and most situations can be improved with the help of sugar.

I still hold on to my anger, though. For one, Iakov has been gone all evening without so much as a note or, seemingly, a care in the world for my safety.

For two, the way Rhiannon keeps sneaking looks at him, like she's trying to work out whether she likes what she sees but she's keeping an open mind regardless.

When she catches my eyes on her, I lift an eyebrow and she gives me a little quirk of her lips and jerk of her head, like she's saying, *Whoa, look at this guy*. I can already tell the topic of Iakov is something she's going to want to discuss at length the next time we're alone.

Luckily, Sanvi is keeping things calm and professional by showing Iakov the fruits of her research. Personally, I would have loved to keep all of our information hidden from him, quietly solve the case and rub it in his face once I got to kick him out. But Sanvi is right, and no matter how much I hate having Iakov here, I still hate having a stalker more.

“So. Profiling is done in several stages,” Sanvi is explaining, fingers laced together and eyebrows knit in concentration. “First, the assimilation stage, where all the clues and information is gathered and examined.”

She flips through the presentation she prepared on her tablet, and honestly, it's gorgeous work. Sanvi is wasted on physics and should be considering a career in forensics.

"I made a note of the dates, collated pictures of the notes Zaro's sent us over the years, sampled the handwriting to make sure they're all from the same person and transcribed the contents for analysis. I obviously don't have any photographs of what he did when he broke in, but I made a note of that, and of the roses he left, which seems to correlate with the other *gifts*"—she makes air quotes with her fingers—"he's sent in the past."

"Like what?" Iakov asks.

"Roses—he likes roses, doesn't he?" Rhiannon says with a grimace. "White roses."

"Why white roses?" Iakov asks, glancing at me. "Personal significance?"

I shrug. "Not to me."

"White roses were a symbol of Aphrodite in ancient Greece," Rhiannon points out. "Maybe a reference to that?"

I nod slowly. "There's also Rosa Mystica. The white rose for the Virgin Mary in Christianity. You know, white for purity, roses for joy. Maybe he's religious?"

Sanvi is scribbling all this down, her pen tapping against her tablet screen.

"I suppose it's also one of the most common wedding flowers," I add.

“And funerals,” Rhiannon says with a little shudder.

We look at each other, and for a moment nobody says anything.

“No funeral,” Iakov says, turning to me so abruptly I almost fall back from my stool. “Only his, if he tries to lay a finger on you.”

The look of grim determination in his eyes confirms his words. Iakov isn’t exaggerating—and he never lies to me.

This time, it’s almost comforting.

“Right. So we have the white roses,” Sanvi says, looking up from her notes. “To me, the white roses are the most important, along with the signature.”

“What signature?” Iakov asks.

“*Lancelot*,” Rhiannon says with a fake gag. “Makes my whole being cringe just to say it.”

“Lancelot, like King Arthur?” Iakov says.

I nod. “Yes, one of the knights of the Round Table. Sought the Holy Grail. Raise by the Lady of the Lake. Considered the first and best amongst Arthur’s knights, was the only one to ever beat Arthur in a duel. Also slept with his wife, Queen Guinevere. Eventually goes insane.”

He watches me and tilts his head ever so slightly. “You know all that?”

“Everybody does.”

Rhiannon shakes her head. “I don’t.”



“I only know because I read up on it for my research,” Sanvi adds.

Iakov gives half a smile, and I quickly look away.

“What about the profile, Dai? Tell him about the profile.”

Sanvi nods and flips through her presentation. “Right. Classification—the next step. That means working out the type of criminal we’re looking at. Organised or impulsive. Based on the notes, the roses, the fact he delivers the notes personally instead of posting them and how he always seems to do so when nobody’s around tells me we’re looking at someone organised. He probably plans everything out.”

“Probably gets off on that, too,” Rhiannon mutters. “Bet it gives him the biggest, perviest hard-ons.”

Everyone around the room lets out a yelp of disgust. Even Iakov winces.

“So next,” Sanvi hurries on, “we work out the *Modus Operandi*—the methodology. That’s what we know the least about, but these are the things we can guess with some certainty: A, he figures out where you live. There are many ways he could work it out: using images from social media and celebrity news, purchasing the information somehow, hiring someone to find out for him, even following you home.” She glances up at me. “Let’s hope that’s not the case. So, B, once he has the address, he sends the notes. He wants you to know about him. I think in his mind, this is his way of courting you, you know, like a *knight*. Hence, C, the roses.”

“So then D is the first big escalation, the break-in,” Rhiannon says, “and what we’re worried about is what E, F and G are going to be.”

“He won’t get that far,” Iakov says with funerary gravity.

“Hold on.” I hold my hand up, interrupting everyone, and frown at Sanvi. “Something’s just occurred to me. Why now?”

“What do you mean?” Rhiannon asks.

I look at Sanvi. “He stuck to notes and roses the first year. Then we all moved out of the house. Now he found me again, more notes, then the break-in. But why now? He’s been sticking to the same thing for years.”

“Maybe because he knows you’re living alone now?” Sanvi says.

“Or maybe he’s trying to punish you for trying to evade him,” Rhiannon adds.

“We all moved out of the first place. He couldn’t know it was his fault.”

“Maybe he’s in some sort of rush?” Sanvi says. “Maybe he thinks he’s running out of time?”

We all look at each other. The good cheer of the evening, my optimism after spending time with the girls, has suddenly dissipated, leaving a chill behind. I shiver, and Iakov leans forward, pushing his arm against mine as he does. The heat of him melts into my body, and this time, I don’t move away.

“So what’s your profile?” he asks Sanvi.

“Right.” She flips her presentation. “I’m a mathematician, not a psychologist or a pathologist, so this is all more or less guesswork based on statistics I’ve found. But this is what I have: male—”

“Obviously,” sneers Rhiannon.

“—aged between thirty-five and sixty-five. Living or residing in London. Educated at least to university level. Above average intelligence. Wealthy or with access to money.”

“So, in conclusion—James,” Rhiannon says, curling her lip in disgust.

“Mattner,” Iakov says. “Sounds like Mattner.”

“How about that creepy teacher you have a crush on?” Rhiannon says.

I turn to her with a frown. “Alright, James, I understand. But Professor Sterling isn’t creepy at all.”

She makes a gagging motion. “Ugh, yes, he is. He’s weirdly obsessed with female students. And he’s so smarmy. That smile. Ugh.”

“He’s not smarmy, he’s just *nice*.”

“Nobody’s that nice for no reason,” Rhiannon mutters stubbornly.

Sanvi pinches her lips together and says, “Um, Rhiannon, people are allowed to be nice.”

“You don’t trust nice people because you’re a raging introvert who hates everyone she’s not intimately acquainted with,” I point out.

Rhiannon doesn’t deny it. She shrugs and says, “A friend to all is a friend to none. Right—Iakov?”

Iakov is looking right at me. “Who’re you thinking?”

I bite into my bottom lips and look down into my empty espresso martini. The truth is that any of them could be right. It *could* be James. Or Mattner. Or even Sterling.

Or it could be Angus, the Duke of Bridehall, who keeps inviting me to his private yacht. Or any of his friends who regularly attend my parents’ parties.

Or it could be Uncle Reginald, who once also sent me roses.

I shake my head and tell him the truth.

“I have no idea.”



RHIANNON AND SANVI STAY for another hour after Iakov gives a grim nod and disappears into his room. We share the box of macarons and talk a bit about university and a bit about plans for my birthday party, but I’m not really in the mood for either of those things. They call a cab, and I make them promise to text me as soon as they get home.

“Nobody would dare murder me,” Rhiannon says. “I would rip their eyeballs out.”

“You’d rip someone’s eyeballs out just for asking you for directions,” I point out.

She laughs and squeezes me into a lung-crushing hug.

“Nobody’s going to dare murder you either,” she says. “Not now you have a big, strong, sexy bodyguard to keep you safe.”

I throw a paranoid look over my shoulder, worried Iakov will hear her, and push her through the door. “Please do not say that ever again! You’re going to make me throw up.”

“Nothing I saw back there made *me* want to throw up,” Rhiannon says, peering over my shoulder into the flat, “if you know what I mean.”

Sanvi hugs me goodbye next and says, “I’m glad Iakov’s back. It puts my mind at ease.”

“Ease? More like *easy on the eyes*,” Rhiannon says with a little snort.

I shake my head. “You’ve had too much to drink.”

“I’m Irish, I can handle my alcohol.”

“Dare you to walk in a straight line all the way to the lift.”

“You betcha.”

Rhiannon places her finger on her nose with a flourish and zigzags to the lift. I can’t help it. I laugh. Sanvi shakes her head and runs off after her, and they wave at me before disappearing behind the elevator doors.

Back in the apartment, I don't bother knocking on Iakov's door. I open it, and balancing my weight on the door handle, I tell him, "You can't kill Mattner."

He's standing at the bedroom window, cigarette in one hand and phone in the other. A freshly opened bottle of vodka is precariously propped on the flat edge of the balcony railing. He throws me a look over his shoulder and speaks as he turns away.

"Sure."

I look around the room. There are some new weights lined up against one wall, bracketed by a monstera and a beautiful areca palm, and a bunch of liquor bottles on the bedside table. Aside from that, his room looks exactly the way I left it when I ransacked his stuff.

"Has a hurricane gone through your room, Fido?" I ask with my sweetest smile.

"No," he answers, still facing out of the window. "More like a nosy little shit."

"Nosy?" I say. "I think you mean *inquisitive*."

He flicks his cigarette over the balcony ledge as if pollution isn't a thing and turns around, grabbing his bottle as he does. Leaning against the window frame, he gestures at me with his bottle.

"Found what you were looking for, *inquisitor*?"

I answer in a huff. "No."

He laughs, harsh and frank. “No. You never do, huh.”

If I wasn't raised better, I'd flip him the finger and walk out. But I'm not about to cede a verbal bout to the bastard prince of monosyllabism and shit syntax.

“I'm serious about Mattner. I know he's awful, and fits Sanvi's profile, but I highly doubt he's the kind of man to stalk someone. Let alone send anyone flowers. Anyway, I'm having a birthday party next month. It might lure out whoever's doing all this.”

Iakov pushes off the window with surprising speed and fluidity for someone his size. He crosses the distance between us in less than three steps. I try to move back, but my back bumps up against the doorway. Resting his hand on top of the door frame, Iakov leans forward, eyes on mine. For a second, I'm reminded of a prowling wolf, and my breath hitches in my chest.

“You inviting me to your birthday party, Kolyuchka?”

“Stop calling me that.”

“What do dogs call their masters?”

I glare at him. “Dogs don't speak.”

He gives that same laugh as before, that harsh sound that rasps its way up my spine like canines dragging across my skin.

“It was just a suggestion anyway,” I say quickly, wishing I hadn't said anything at all, wishing I hadn't gone into his room in the first place. “Come, don't come—who cares? I certainly

don't. I have no intention of so much as acknowledging your existence regardless."

"Nice," Iakov says, "I'm honoured to be invited." And after a smug little pause, he asks, "Is your pedo mate Mattner gonna be there, then?"

A burst of heat explodes in my face. I raise both hands to shove him off me, but he stays exactly where he is, watching me press against his chest with all my might.

"If you let me teach you some self-defence, maybe you'd be able to fight me off," he says with a grim smile.

I tilt my head back and give him a contemptuous look. "You wouldn't dare touch a hair on my head."

"I don't want to hurt you, Kolyuchka. I want to teach you to defend yourself against those who do."

"What if *I* want to hurt *you*?"

"Then hurt me."

There's a glimmer in those sepulchral eyes and his half-grin shows the sharp edges of his teeth. I have the sudden feeling of having strayed into unknown territory, a girl lost in a dark forest, alone but for the wolf facing her.

Iakov leans forward like he's about to kiss me, but he doesn't.

"Would my pain soothe yours?" he murmurs. "Then hurt me, Kolyuchka. Any way you like. I'm your dog, aren't I? A cruel mistress is still a mistress."



A tremor runs through my body and my knees almost give way. I can't say a single thing, my tongue melted wax in my mouth. So I dip under him and run away, slamming my bedroom door shut after me.

His expression remains etched like a shadow across my vision for the rest of the night, like the ring of black light after staring too long into the sun.

# Cold Showers

## **Iakov**

I MUST BE SICK in the head because after Zahara storms out of my bedroom, I'm left alone with a raging erection. Those were common enough when I was younger, but these days my dick rarely has any reason to get hard. I should've known moving into Zahara Blackwood's apartment would change that.

This girl is strictly out of bounds, for obvious reasons, and since she hates me, it keeps those boundaries clear.

But of course, I'm fucked in the head, and, as Luca said, I must like pain, so Zahara's hatred doesn't always have the effect it should.

Zahara wanting to hurt me should be worrying, or at least amusing.

It definitely shouldn't make my cock hard and my head fill with thoughts of Zahara clawing marks into my skin.

There's absolutely no fucking way I'm wanking here or now. It would be the kind of degenerate shit I'd expect from Luca, not myself. Zach's my best friend, and if I fucked my own fist just because his sister told me she wants to hurt me, I don't think I could ever look him in the eyes again.

So I go into the bathroom, which of course smells of her perfume and has her satin robes all lined up on pretty gold hooks, and run the shower as cold as it'll go.

It's enough to get rid of my erection, but not enough to stop me from staying up all night fighting the demons in my head.



IRONICALLY, ZAHARA SEEMS WELL-RESTED and in a surprisingly good mood the following day. And maybe she's more afraid of her stalker than she lets on, or maybe she was serious about wanting to hurt me. Either way, she marches into the living room while I'm having breakfast and tells me that she's going to let me teach her some self-defence.

She declares it with a tone of authority, hands on her hips and a ferocious look on her face. "I want you to teach me how to fight."

"Alright."

She glares at me. "That's it?"

I look around at her flat, the beautiful rugs and plants and little statues and candelabras and paintings in gold frames. "What. You wanna do it *here*?"

"Obviously not. I thought you'd be—I don't know. Raring to go."

I sit back and look at her. She looks like a gorgeous scholar: loose woollen jumper and short skirt, white socks and black loafers, a beret over her curls. She's all soft curves and

intelligent eyes and pristine beauty. She looks nothing like a fighter, and the thought of training her to throw a punch or put someone in a chokehold is both funny and terrifying.

“Don’t you have classes?” I ask her.

“Yes. And a tutorial with my dissertation tutor.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow’s a half-day.”

“Then we’ll start tomorrow.”

She grabs her coat, her bag and her books and saunters off in a flurry of curls and a cloud of perfume. I drop my head down onto the marble countertop in front of me.

“Fuck.”

Guess I’m going to be taking a lot of cold showers from now on.



LATER THAT DAY, I get a phone call from Anton. For a moment, my finger hovers over the red button. I’ve been ignoring his calls and messages since I arrived in London. There’s only so long I can keep doing that. Besides, Anton would never ignore *my* calls.

For fuck’s sake.

I press the green button and lift the phone to my ear.

“Where the fuck have you been?” Anton barks.

“Around.”

“You stupid fuck, you had me worried. I thought someone might have finally bashed your skull in.”

“If only.”

“Don’t joke about shit like that, patsan. Have you done what your father asked yet?”

“No.”

“Handle it. He’s getting restless, and you know what he’s like. You don’t want him angry at you. *I* don’t want him angry at you.”

“I’ll handle it,” I say. “Calm down, dedushka. All this stress is bad for your old heart.”

“You little shit. How about don’t stress me out, then, huh?”

“I said I’ll handle it.”

“Fuck’s sake. Good. Alright.” He’s silent for a moment, and I can imagine him running his burly hand through his hair, slicking it back. “You eating well and shit?”

“Yea.”

“Good, good. Alright. Eat your fucking vegetables and—I don’t know—don’t get anyone pregnant.”

“Why, you don’t want a grandkid?” I ask.

Anton laughs. “Hah—I’d love a grandkid, but you’re not ready for that shit. You’re still a kid yourself. Sort your life out first, yea?”

It’s good advice. Sort my life out, huh? If only it was that easy.

“You wanna hang up, dedushka, or are you gonna tell me you love me first?”

“Oh, fuck off. Take care of yourself, patsan.”

“You too.”

I shove my phone in my back pocket, throw on a hoodie and jacket and leave the apartment, making sure everything’s locked and the concierge is in his office.

Unlike what Anton thinks, I haven’t completely ignored the job my father gave me. I’ve managed to track down both journalists my father wants dead. One is a born and bred Brit, Oxford-educated, with a globe-spanning career as a war correspondent. The other is a Russian expat who probably didn’t have much of a choice but to leave Russia. It wasn’t hard to follow them home from their offices and find out where they lived.

My Russian comrade is the one I pay a visit to after my conversation with Anton.

Not out of a sense of patriotic loyalty, but because he’ll get the urgency of his situation more than his British mate. I corner him behind his apartment building, just as he’s finished tying his bicycle to a rack. I grab him by his shoulders and

haul him behind the bulk of a bin, away from any CCTV cameras.

“What do you want?” he huffs, glaring at me.

He doesn't think he's being robbed. Interesting. I must be losing my touch.

“Did you expect someone to come for you?” I ask, shoving him against the wall and pinning him there with one arm, just so he stays in the dead spot.

“Yes,” he says. “I had a feeling trouble might find me.” His English is as posh and polished as any of his peers, but like me, his mother tongue peeks out now and again, especially around the Rs.

“Right—good. Then I don't need to tell you the shit you're in, do I?”

“If you wanted me dead, I'd be dead,” he says. “So what do you want?”

“You've pissed off Kavinski and his mates. You and your journo buddy. The oligarchs are on edge, and they think only the grave can shut you up.”

He tilts his head at me. He's a small, weedy guy, rather dark, with a neatly trimmed beard and wire-framed glasses. Despite how slight he is, he's pretty brave. He looks me straight in the eyes and even lets out a scoff of disdain.

“You're the bastard son, aren't you? The thug Kavinski sets on his enemies like an attack dog.”



“If you know who I am, then you know you’re in trouble,” I tell him. “You and your mate. I just came to warn you. Don’t take my warning lightly.”

“You know why he sends you, don’t you?” the journo asks. The pressure of my arm on his chest makes his breath short, but he still manages to push out a rattle of laughter. “Because you’re disposable. Because if you get caught doing his dirty work, you’re the one who’ll spend the rest of your life in prison, not him.”

“You’re saying my dad doesn’t love me?” I ask him in a deadpan tone.

He shakes his head. “I’m saying Pavel Kavinski’s not going to let one son’s death get in the way of another’s.”

Dead son? For a second, I just stare at the journalist. There’s a look in his eyes, a cutting sort of intelligence that seems to see right through you. It almost reminds me of Zachary.

I never once in my life questioned if there were others like me, other boys ripped from their homes and recruited into my father’s army of mindless thugs. But that’s exactly something my father would do. Father bastards and make them into disposable soldiers.

I give the journalist a bleak smile. “Even a dirty old man like him will run out of bastards sometime.”

The journalist shakes his head. “I can’t tell if you’re stupid or just dead inside. Probably both, just like the last Kavinski heir. And now it’s just a matter of time for Pavel. Will he wait

for you to kill yourself or will he send someone to kill you just like he sent you to kill me?”

My mind flashes to Anton. My father’s right-hand man. When my father shoots a gun, it’s Anton’s finger on the trigger.

If my father ever decides to have me killed, I know exactly who he’ll send.

I brush away the journalist’s words with a laugh. He’s just trying to get under my skin, and it’s working. Time to end this and get the fuck out.

“If he does,” I say, letting him go so roughly he almost falls on his ass, “then I hope I’m as lucky as you are. I’ve not come to kill you, jackass. I’ve come to warn you. My father wants you dead—your time is up. Get far the fuck away because the next guy he sends won’t be so nice.”

He straightens himself, pushes his glasses up on his nose and watches me for a long moment.

“I won’t stop, you know,” he says finally, voice tight. “I’ll never stop. Corruption is the tumour in the heart of Russia—the whole country has cancer. Someone needs to do something.”

“Nobody ever saved the world with a pen,” I tell him.

“No, but change is brought about by those who speak up, not those who cower and obey.”

I shrug. “Do what you like. I came to warn you. What you do next is on you.”

I turn to walk away, but he catches me by my arm and pulls me back behind the bin. I frown at him.

“What?”

“Help me,” he says.

“I already have.”

“No. Your father. He’s not a god. He’s just a man. Nobody can put him away because nobody can get close enough. But you’re his son—bastard or not. You’ll be his heir someday. So *help me*. We can take him down. I have contacts, and I have a file on him like you wouldn’t believe. I just need evidence.”

I throw my head back with laughter. “You stupid fuck. You’ll never take him down, not with all the evidence in the world. There’s no beast strong enough to take *that* fucking monster down. You can try, but you’ll die trying.” I give him a grim smile. “So will I, probably.”

And this time, I walk away for good. I’ve done all I can for this man. If he wants to break all of his bones smashing himself against the impregnable fortress that is my father, hell, who am I to stop him?

“Hey!”

I turn my head. He looks at me across the alley. “Thank you anyway.”

“For what?”

“Sparing me.”

“Yea, sure.”



THAT NIGHT, WHEN I'M smoking a cigarette and flicking through Plato's *Republic* aimlessly, I stop to read one of the quotes Zachary underlined.

*"Wherefore each of you, when his turn comes, must go down to the general underground abode, and get the habit of seeing in the dark."*

"Right," I mutter, thinking about the journalists who should be dead and my father somewhere in Russia, waiting for a reason to pull the trigger on me.

No need to get the habit of seeing in the dark when you live in it.

# Black Serpents

## Zahara

IAKOV, AS USUAL, IS true to his word.

His self-defence lessons aren't at all what I expected. He takes me to a nearby mixed martial arts gym, and we sit in a corner of an empty section. Instead of giving me boxing gloves or telling me to pick up weights, he says, "If you're in danger, what's the first thing you should do?"

"Fight."

He shakes his head. "No. Even if you know how to fight, even if you're strong, even if you're bigger than the other person—the first thing you do is try to get away." I frown at him, but he carries on glumly. "This is the most important thing I'm gonna teach you. If you can't fight, run. If you *can* fight, run. If you can't run, give everything you have. Elbows, knees, nails, teeth. Buy yourself the time you need to run. And then *run*."

"That's the lesson you want to teach me? To be a coward?"

"Not a coward. A survivor. If you die, it won't matter if you died fighting. You'll be dead. You have to live, no matter what. More people die fighting than running."

"What about you?" I say.

"What about me?"

"I've never seen you once run away from a fight."

He grins, a bleak, joyless thing. “What makes you think I want to live?”

His words send a stabbing sensation through my chest. Not quite pain, not quite sadness. If it feels like anything, it feels like anger.

“*Everybody* wants to live,” I tell him.

He laughs, springs to his feet and throws a pair of boxing gloves at my chest. “Glove up. Let’s see what those thorns of yours are capable of.”



IF NOTHING ELSE, HIS lessons are a nice break from studying. Even I have to admit I feel mentally refreshed after my training sessions with Iakov.

As far as instructors go, he’s intense but patient. He never makes me feel stupid when I miss a punch or fail to understand the basic chokeholds and self-defence manoeuvres he tries to teach me. He never mocks me when I’m sweating and panting from exertion. When I ask for a break, he brings me water and waits as long as I need.

And even though I would never admit it in a hundred years, a part of me likes training with Iakov. Maybe it’s because of

his patience, or the way he stands over me to fix my boxing wraps, or the way he looks when he's punching the bags.

And after all, I'm just a woman. It's not like I can't feel his hands on my hips when he tries to fix my stance, or his big arm around my neck when he tries to teach me how to get out from someone grabbing me.

It doesn't help that I've been avoiding James like the plague, that all my nights are long and lonely, and that Iakov's words from the other day haunt my mind.

*Would my pain soothe yours? Then hurt me, Kolyuchka. Any way you like. I'm your dog, aren't I? A cruel mistress is still a mistress.*

Who says stuff like that? And how am I supposed to not think about it when Iakov instructs me to try punching him or shows me how to twist his arm behind his back?

My growing frustration is only exacerbated by the great and obvious care Iakov takes to not cross any boundaries with me. We always train in the martial arts gym, with people around. He's always covered head to toe in black sweatpants, T-shirt and a hoodie. He never touches me longer than he needs to, and his eyes never linger on me when I unzip my top or train in shorts because I'm too hot.

You would think that would make me feel better, and ease some of the tension.

But it just makes it worse.



And since my insomnia is the worst it's ever been since I was sixteen, I end up having nothing better to do at night than think about it. About Iakov's eyes on me, his body pressed against mine through layers of clothes, the sheer strength of him. About how grim and depressing he is, how much I hate him, how much I want him gone. About how he refuses to let his skin make contact with mine, how he called me his cruel mistress, how he's going to inevitably go back to Russia.

During the days, I go to university, I study, I spend time with my friends, I avoid James, I train with Iakov.

During the nights, my mind becomes a feverish loop.

*I want him gone.*

*I want him near.*

*I want to sleep.*

*I need him gone.*

*I need him close.*

*I need...*

I don't even know what I need.



THE WEEK BEFORE MY birthday party, I give up on sleep altogether. I'm too anxious about the party to even delude

myself into believing I'm going to fall asleep. The London set is going to be there, Zach and Theo might come, James will be there. Erik might turn up just for the sake of being *seen* turning up. Rhiannon is going to be there, out for James's blood. Iakov is going to be there, out for Erik's blood.

I'm going to be there, even though I would rather just be at home with my loved ones eating cake and dancing.

One night, I'm lying on my stomach on the couch trying to draft an essay on Anglo-Saxon values in *Beowulf* when the front door opens. For a second, I'm too delirious and sleep-deprived to do anything. Then I think about Iakov's knife hidden in my underwear drawer, and I spring to my feet, almost sending my laptop flying.

Before I can reach my room, a familiar lumbering shape appears from the corridor, and twin black eyes in shadow sockets like a skull fall on me.

"You're still up," Iakov says without any intonation whatsoever.

I hadn't even realised he'd gone outside. It must be near three in the morning. I glare at him. "So are you."

"Can't sleep," he says.

He turns and goes into his bedroom. At this point, my eyes sting, my body is heavy as lead and my brain feels like someone's tried to wring it dry like a towel. So I follow him into his bedroom before he can shut the door in my face. He lifts an eyebrow at me but doesn't try to stop me.

“You’ve turned this room into an absolute disaster,” I tell him, grimacing at the bottles slowly aggregating near the foot of his bed, the book propped open upside down near his pillow and the untidy nest of blankets. “Did your mother never teach you to make your bed in the morning?”

He gives me a look like he wants to say something, then pauses, then shrugs off his leather jacket and says, “Like you didn’t have servants making yours.”

“You mean staff,” I say, shoulders stiffening a little. “This is the twenty-first century, Fido, we don’t call people servants anymore.”

“No,” he says. “Just dog names.”

That makes me bristle. I don’t treat him like a servant—I’m not the one making him stay here or forcing him to bring me back boxes of macarons every time he goes out—and I resent the implication that I do. “That’s different.”

“Sure.”

The ghost of his words crosses my mind. *A cruel mistress is still a mistress.*

I pinch my lips shut and chew the insides of my cheeks, watching him. He throws his leather jacket on the back of the antique Edwardian green velvet chair. Before I can say anything about his blatant disregard for my painstakingly curated furniture, I’m knocked speechless.

Iakov is undressing.

At first, it's just his jacket and boots. But then he's peeling off the big black sweater he's wearing, and the T-shirt under it, tossing both on top of the jacket. He starts unbuttoning his shabby black jeans and I step back with a gasp like a girl in a horror film.

“*Excuse me? I'm right here?*”

He pauses with his hands on his waistband and gives me a look like a confused dog.

“You never seen someone's underwear before?”

“Not *unsolicited!*” I exclaim, outraged, even though that's actually and factually not true at all.

He looks at me, as if considering my point, and then shrugs, as if to himself, and says, “Don't need to stay, though, do you?”

“You can't just undress in front of me!” My voice comes out as scandalised as a Victorian aunt who's caught sight of an exposed ankle. “We *live* together, we're not *married!*”

He stops completely and stares at me, and I clap my mouth shut in mortification. I have no idea why I just said that. It's not like I'm a nun, or even believe in marriage at all, let alone waiting until marriage for anything, let alone nudity, so I have no idea why *that's* the statement that came out of my mouth. I have nothing to blame but the lack of sleep and my addled brain.

“Uh...” Iakov says, sounding, for the first time I've ever known him, genuinely taken aback. “Sorry?” He lifts his hands

away from his trousers and up in the air like I'm pointing a gun at him. "Shirt back on?" he asks, jerking his chin in the direction of his shirt.

My eyes drop from his face to his body.

Iakov's body is like nothing I've ever seen. He's not shredded like every guy seems to be these days, with a picture-perfect six-pack nestled into a concave abdomen. Iakov is *big*—he's thick with muscles. His chest looks like it could provide enough cushioning to protect you from a high-impact collision. His abs form a thick V-shaped ledge over his hipbones. His forearms look bigger than my thighs, a vein running up the side of each one like a seam.

There are more tattoos on him than I imagined, too. Two black serpents slithering down from his shoulders to choke the throat of a wolf in the middle of his chest. A moon stabbed through with a knife. A small yellow sunflower. Strings of thorns around his neck and arms. A list of years in Gothic script. A date.

So many tattoos and still nowhere near enough to hide the scars on him.

Iakov suddenly steps forward. Because of his size in comparison to the size of the room, the sheer overwhelming bulk of his presence, it immediately feels like he's too close, like there just isn't enough space between us.

I know he won't touch me—Iakov wouldn't touch me even if he was dying to—but my breath still catches.

I look up. He's smiling at me.

"Look your fill," he has the absolute *audacity*, the unmitigated *gall*, to say to me.

"At what?" I spit out in as withering a tone as I can muster.

He shrugs. "Whatever you want."

"There's nothing here I *want*."

I'm not lying. Am I lying? What is it I want again? I want him gone. I want him close. I don't want him at all. I want—

"Alright," he says. His solemn tone cuts through my thoughts like a clean blade. "Then you should go, Kolyuchka. I'm gonna take my trousers off and we're not *married*."

And even though it's a mortal blow to my pride, because I don't have the courage to stay, I wrench his door open and escape out of his room like a deer that's barely escaped the jaws of the wolf.



I DON'T EVEN REMEMBER falling asleep that night. All I remember is storming into my bedroom angrily, angrily walking around, angrily wondering where on earth he found the audacity to behave the way he did and undress in front of me like I'm not a fellow human being with a pulse, and angrily

being angry at myself for bringing up marriage like some sort of prudish aunt.

In the end, I wander back into the living room and glare at the sky and peaceful Knightsbridge street, where I'm certain everybody is already sleeping peacefully, and try to do some more work on my essay. I close my eyes to try and chase my comfort fantasy, where Professor Sterling is reading my essay over my shoulder and then gently slides my hair aside to kiss the nape of my neck, but even my imagination isn't free of Iakov Kavinski these days, because what I imagine instead is his big body and the two black serpents across his shoulders and chest.

Except that instead of the snakes strangling the wolf, it's me, pressed against his chest, and instead of the two serpents, it's his hands around my neck. His thumbs push at the space under my jaw, forcing me to tilt my head back. I look up at Iakov, at the dark slits of his eyes, his mouth curling in that strange half-smile.

"Be gentle with me, Kolyuchka," he says, his voice the low keen of an injured beast. "Hurt me but be gentle, cruel mistress, before I vanish."

I stare at him in horror as tears fall from his eyes, thick and slick and black as tar. I open my mouth to scream, but the shock seals my throat shut. Then Iakov melts like black candle wax, leaving nothing behind. I choke on a sob—

—and start awake.

The autumnal sunlight, saturated a bright yellow-gold, pours into the room, playing across the ceiling. I blink and turn over, surprised to find myself in my bed.

Strange. I thought I fell asleep on the couch.



# Beauty & Pain

## Iakov

IT USED TO BE so easy to look at Zahara and see nothing more than Zachary's little sister. How could I see her as anything else? Back when I met her, she was so young and vulnerable, and she looked so much like him. Same dark curls, same brown eyes and long eyelashes, same smooth brown skin, rich and glossy as butter.

She is all those things still, but different. Not just older, more confident, more independent. But there's something about her that seems designed just to hurt me.

Piercing eyes, sharp tongue, gut-punch beauty. Her existence is one continuous blow.

I find her just before dawn, asleep on the couch like a princess in a storybook. There's a slight frown on her face, and her lips are turned down at the corners. Even though her tiny silk pyjamas do nothing to hide her body, it's still the sadness on her face that hits the hardest.

Why hasn't someone come into this girl's life to get rid of all that sadness yet? Sure she's a thorny rose, but so what? Isn't that the appeal of roses? The beauty *and* the pain?

And isn't Zahara Blackwood smart and sharp and brave and strong and beautiful enough to make your heart burst? What have all these guys in her life been doing?

I scoop her into my arms and she doesn't even stir. No wonder she's out like a light—she can't have fallen asleep any earlier than five. It's no way to live. I should know.

Her bedroom is like the rest of her apartment: beautifully decorated and full of plants. Despite the tidy room, her bed is a chaotic mess. Rumpled pillows, blanket and throw all tangled up. I know this sight well.

The messy bed of an insomniac.

I lay her down into her bed. She curls herself away from me, burrowing her face into her pillows, body arching as she does. My eyes drop to the curve of her arse, the gleam of her silk shorts. I quickly pull her blankets over her, turn off her lamp and leave her bedroom, closing her door behind me.

I sigh and shake my head. It takes a real piece of shit to perv on his friend's sister while she's asleep. Time for some more self-loathing and another ice-cold shower.

It doesn't make me feel much better. But I do fall asleep straight after, which is—fuck it—something, I guess.



THE NEXT MORNING, I wake up to the smell of coffee and the sound of footsteps. I roll over in bed and scrunch one eye open. Zahara is crossing my room in a black woollen dress and

pearl necklace, two cups of coffee in her hands. She puts one down on the bedside table, the sunlight catching the gold strands in her hair like she's a being from a better world.

“Are you coming to my birthday party or not?” she asks as if we're in the middle of a conversation.

I rub my knuckles into my eyes, trying to figure out what time and day and even year it is.

“When?”

“Friday. At *La Brindille*. It's only going to be a small gathering, just under a hundred people, dinner and drinks and dancing. Nothing wild.”

I know exactly how rich kids celebrate their birthdays, I just can't tell whether she's trying to lie or just deluding herself. Either way, it doesn't matter.

“I'll be there,” I say.

“Alright,” she says, giving a curt little nod. “Good. Well. I'll see you there?”

I sit up and stretch. “I'll take you if you want.”

She purses her lips, hesitates, then, “I have a date.”

“Yea?” I say with a huff of laughter.

Her eyes immediately narrow. There's a smear of black eyeliner and brown shimmer on them that brings out the brown of her pupils like it's been painted on by an artist. Fuck, she's beautiful, beautiful like I could fall to my knees at her feet, and I'm still so tired I half-wonder if I'm dreaming.

“You’re amused?” she asks in a tone icy enough to shatter glass.

“Nah. Not really.” I grab the cup of coffee and tip it slightly towards her. “Never thought I’d see the day you brought me coffee.”

“It was to say thank you,” she says stiffly, straightening her entire body and looking down her pretty little nose at me, “for bringing me to my bed last night.”

“Anytime,” I say, taking a sip of coffee.

“No, not anytime. Don’t do it again.”

“No?”

“No. It’s already infantilising enough having you in my apartment making sure the big bad man doesn’t hurt me. I don’t need you carrying me into bed like I’m a five-year-old.”

I think about her little top and shorts, the curve of her body when she arched in her bed—the long cold shower I was forced to take—and choke down a gulp of coffee when a rush of blood heads straight to my cock. She’s worried for the wrong reasons, but since we’re both in agreement that I probably shouldn’t have her in my arms again, I’m not gonna fight her.

“As you say, Kolyuchka. Your wish is my command, right?”

“Don’t call me that.”

I nod. “Yes, *Zahara*.”

She stares at me, blinking her doe eyes. “That’s so much worse, somehow.” She shakes her head, straightens herself with all the arrogance of a Blackwood, and glares at me. “How about don’t call me anything at all, and let’s never speak to one another again?”

“Whatever you want. Thanks for the coffee, anyway.”

She turns to go, hips swaying in that authoritative stride of hers, like a tyrant queen. At the door, she stops, turns, and gives me a smile of supreme contempt.

“Nice erection, by the way. I’m flattered, truly.”

“I woke up like this.”

“Please.” She lets out a smug puff of smoky laughter. “I’ve always suspected you have wet dreams about me.”

I sigh. “Every night.”

“Ew. Pervert.”

“Better leave now.” I start pushing the blankets back. “Gotta take care of this.”

She runs off with a scandalised cry that melts into an impish giggle.

Time for another cold shower.

At this rate, I’ll die of pneumonia before the end of the winter. A better death than I deserve, I guess.

# Nobody's Man

## Zahara

“SO... DOES YOUR BODYGUARD have a date?”

Rhiannon cranes her head to peer at the guest room through the open doorway of my bedroom. Sanvi pulls her head back with a little tut as she tries to school Rhiannon’s mane into some semblance of a hairstyle.

“He’s not my bodyguard,” I tell Rhiannon, glaring at her through the mirror.

She arrived with Sanvi about an hour ago, bags and pre-drinks in tow. Since then, we’ve been in my bedroom getting ready for the party, and Rhiannon has finally run out of whatever self-control she had.

Not that she had much to begin with, given the number of times I caught her glancing into the hallway. To be fair, self-control has never been her strong suit, but that’s something I’ve always loved about her.

Until now.

“You know what I mean. Your faux bodyguard. Your *faux-dyguard*, as it were. You know—your roomie. Your himbo Russian boyo.”

“He’s not my anything,” I tell her.

“His name is Iakov,” says Sanvi, patiently fixing Rhiannon’s head for the seventeenth time in a row.



“Fine,” Rhiannon says. “Does *nobody’s man* Iakov have a date?”

I sigh and finally give up on perfecting my makeup. “How should I know?”

“Um, you two *live* together? Did he mention a date?”

“He’s not the dating kind.”

“No?” Rhiannon asks, slow and salacious. She licks her lips dramatically. “Our man’s a bit of a slag, huh?”

I take a sip of champagne, which I sorely need. “I didn’t say that.”

This conversation is very on-brand for Rhiannon, and it’s normally the kind of frivolous chatter I enjoy, especially after a few drinks. And I don’t know why I’m not enjoying it as much this time because it’s not like I’m worried about Rhiannon getting anywhere with Iakov. Even if she did, it would truly be none of my business.

Iakov is *Zachary’s* best friend, not my boyfriend. Just because I’ve seen him topless and got a glimpse of his erection under his blanket doesn’t mean anything has changed between us.

He’s still just *Zachary’s best friend*, and I still want him gone from my life.

“I bet he’s lonely,” Sanvi says, ripping me clean out of my thoughts. “He seems—I don’t know. Sort of sad. He always has, even when we were younger.”

I almost choke on a mouthful of champagne. “*Sad?*”

Rhiannon and Sanvi nod in perfect unison, which is especially frightening because they so rarely agree on anything.

“Totally, Dai. I get exactly what you mean. It’s his eyes,” Rhiannon says in a tone of sorrowful wisdom. “Like a night sky after it’s rained.”

This is the kind of thing my brother would say, not Rhiannon, who is famous in her year group for being the girl who started a drunken fight on a train platform and once passed out in the bosom of a rhododendron bush.

I can’t help it—I laugh. “*What* are you talking about?”

“He gives off the vibe of someone who had a bad childhood,” Sanvi says, thankfully staying away from dubious similes.

I think about Iakov in Spearcrest when he was eighteen and I was sixteen. How he always came back from Russia bruised and battered. A horrible little wave of queasiness rolls through my stomach.

“You can tell all this from having met him all of that one single time?” I ask, raising an eyebrow at Rhiannon.

I don’t know why this line of discussion is so repugnant to me. Maybe it’s because I’m more protective than I realised over Iakov and his secrets. I still remember telling Zach about Iakov’s abusive father and Zach’s shock despite long years of friendship with Iakov. The feeling I had back still lives deep

inside me: a heart-wrenching guilt, like I'd committed a wretched act of betrayal.

Or maybe it's because I'm still determined to hate Iakov, and Rhiannon and Sanvi are reminding me of the reasons I ought to show him grace rather than cruelty. I don't want things between us to change. They've already changed far more than I'm comfortable with.

Everything is becoming too different, too unsafe. The lines I've set between us are walls by this point, and I have no idea what would happen if those walls came crashing down.

"Iakov is *fine*," I say, standing up and speaking with the kind of authority I've learned from my father, like what I'm saying is the whole, perfect truth, and anybody who challenges me would only be embarrassing themselves. "You two don't need to worry about his little world of emotions because I can tell you right now that Iakov does not feel emotions."

Sanvi and Rhiannon exchange a glance, but whether or not they believe me, they get the message and immediately drop the issue.

That is until we're all ready and sitting in our private cab on the way to *La Brindille*, and Rhiannon says mulishly, "So, then... does Iakov have a date or not?"



I ARRIVE AT MY party fashionably late, like any seasoned socialite ought to, and make the rounds, kissing cheeks and receiving birthday wishes with a smile. When I've paid my social dues, I sweep the party with a glance.

It makes my blood boil, but the face I scan the room for is Iakov's. Maybe it's Rhiannon's fault, for talking about him the whole cab journey to the bar, and maybe it's because the memory of our last conversation is still seared into my mind, along with the sound of my name in his mouth and the memory of the bulge in his bedsheets.

And maybe—just maybe—it's because I've spotted James, having a charming chat with Professor Sterling—whom I forgot I invited and never expected to show up—and Emilio, whom I dated briefly during my first year at university. The sight of James sends a little shudder of disgust through me, and I find myself secretly wishing Iakov would appear out of nowhere to smash his fist clean through James's skull.

He probably would as well, if I asked him to. I could point to anybody in the room, and Iakov would rip them out of my party by the neck and throw them in the Thames.

When I was sixteen, I hated how violent Iakov got when guys got too close to me, but these days, I think I would enjoy nothing more than watching him tear each of my men limb from limb.

But the black-eyed bleak-faced bastard hasn't even shown up yet.

“Happy birthday, beautiful girl.”

James sidles up to me and leans down to kiss me on the lips. My body jerks with the urge to move back, to avoid the kiss, but I can't bring myself to humiliate him in public. I receive his kiss with an obliging smile.

"I'm surprised you came," I murmur, too quietly for anybody but him to hear.

He gives me a smile that's both indulgent and condescending—the kind of smile an uncle might grace upon a young niece.

"I could never be so cold-hearted as to miss my favourite girl's birthday." He leans down to speak against my ear. "I've booked us a suite for the night."

I have no intention of going back to his hotel room with him. If I have to, I will use every gut-punch and crotch-kick and arm-bar Iakov has taught me so far. I even have my stolen switch knife tucked away in my tiny purse, and I'm not above drawing it on James.

"Well, I'm glad you're here," I force myself to say.

I glance over his shoulder. Still no sign of Iakov.

The absolute bastard. He *said* he would come.

A lump rises in my throat, and I blink quickly. The familiar feeling settles on me again, like everyone in this room is a shadow on a wall and I'm completely alone in a cold void. I have the urge to turn around, walk out, take a cab home and spend the rest of my birthday in my bed with a slice of cake and a cup of tea.

Then an arm wraps around my waist, and I look up into Rhiannon's face. I almost melt from relief. She throws James a look that makes no effort to hide its contempt and says, "I need to steal away the birthday girl for a sec."

"I'm James," he says, stretching out his hand, "and you are...?"

"Because I need to take a piss!" she yells into his face like she hasn't heard him, even though I know she heard him perfectly well.

And then she drags me away from his bewildered expression and still-outstretched hand until both disappear in the crowd.

She leads me to a quiet corner of the bar, orders a bramble for me and a beer for herself, and turns to me with a big puff of a sigh.

"Ugh. Can't fucking stand him," she declares like she's not stating the obvious.

I laugh. I could honestly kiss her I'm so grateful. "I know you can't."

"You need to dump him, girl. I'll do it for you if you want."

"I know, I do," I sigh. "I know."

"You don't even like him," she says. She takes my face in her hands. "You know how sad you looked when he started speaking to you? It breaks my fucking heart, Zaro. Surely even being alone is better than being with this total loser?"

I swallow. I don't want to cry at my own birthday party, because that would be the most egregious of social faux pas, but Rhiannon's honesty always manages to pierce right through me. I regret being so annoyed at her, because I can honestly say she's one of the best people in my life. And if she wants Iakov, she deserves him, because they are both good, decent people who have never done anything but try to look out for me.

"I know," I say again, speaking thickly around the lump in my throat. "I don't know why I'm with him. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"There's nothing wrong with you," Rhiannon says, grabbing my arms. "There's something wrong with all those horrible men. Wanting to be loved is normal—perving on young women isn't."

"I'm not even that young," I say, thinking of Erik approaching me at the club when I was sixteen, or Uncle Reginald sending me roses when I was eleven.

"Are you kidding?" Rhiannon laughs in my face and pinches my cheeks. "You're a literal tiny little *baby!*"

I can't help but laugh. I never can around her. It washes the lump in my throat away, and I suddenly feel a lot lighter.

"Get off me, you crone," I say. "I feel like you're about to steal me away to your cottage in the woods."

"Please. That's more Grandpa James's MO, not mine."

I shudder. "Ugh. Don't call him Grandpa James, I beg you."

“I bet he has liver spots on his dick,” Rhiannon says, shaking her head.

“Ew, Rhi! Straight to jail for that!”

She laughs a devilish laugh and hands me the bramble the bartender’s just put down in front of us.

“Come on, drink, and let’s actually enjoy your party. I’ll be on James-guarding duty. Make sure he doesn’t get within seven feet of you at any given time. It’s my birthday present to you. Chin-chin, bitch.” She clinks her bottle against the rim of my glass.

“He *is* my date, you know.”

She grimaces. “Not anymore, he’s not. Should’ve brought your big Russian bodyguard as your date.”

“Wouldn’t wanna make you jealous,” I tell her, but to myself, *I wish I had.*



## Devil's Word

## Iakov

I GET A CALL from Luca just as I'm about to set off for Zahara's party. The November night is dry but cold, the fallen leaves on the roads crispy with frost. I have to bite off a glove to answer the phone, and I shove it between my shoulder and my cheek.

"What do you want, Fletch?"

He doesn't seem remotely bothered by my lack of greeting.

"Looks like Little Miss Blackmail is back on the prowl. Time to go hunting, wolfie. You got a shadow to catch."

"I got something on tonight. Can't it wait?"

Luca's dry laugh crackles down my ear. "Depends how quickly you want me to start looking for that lost sister of yours, Kav."

Ruthless fucker.

"Text me an address," I tell him. "I'm setting off now."

"Good man. Cheer up, Kav. I just need you to tail her to her place and get me her address. I'm not sending you to fetch me her heart in a fucking box."

*No, I think, you'd rather cut it out yourself.*

I end the call. A second later, a message pops up on my screen. The address to Luca's club. CHOKER. Of course, that's what he would call his club. Creepy fucker.

I grab my helmet and head down to get my bike. I hop on and check the time. It's a little after eleven. Provided Luca's racketeer doesn't take too long before she heads home, I should still be able to make it to Zahara's party with some time left to take a look at her circus of men.

"Fucking Fletch," I mutter out loud, and then kick my trusted bike into life and set off screeching into the dark heart of the city.



I LIGHT MY THIRD cigarette, watching the bright entrance of a hotel from across the street. I'm sitting at the top of a set of steps, sheltered underneath a fancy stone archway, my bike propped at the bottom of the steps.

I check my watch. One a.m. The girl and her mark have been in the hotel for almost an hour. When I followed them out of the club, the guy with his arm wrapped around her waist, the girl teetering a little under his weight, I imagined she wouldn't bother fucking him before knocking him out and robbing him blind.

But either they're fucking, or the girl is taking her time framing and photographing her blackmail material, or something went wrong—because this is taking longer than I

expected. I can only hope Zahara's birthday party maintains the rich kid tradition of lasting until dawn.

I promised her I would be there, and I have no intention of becoming just another lying fucker in her life.

The hotel doorman pulls open the door, and a rectangle of light falls across the dark pavement. In the middle of it, a girl with a trenchcoat and shoulder-length blond hair. She stops outside the hotel, glancing around. Does she think she's being followed?

I toss aside my cigarette and make my way to my bike, expecting her to get into one of the black cabs waiting outside.

She doesn't.

Crossing her arms tightly over her chest, she sets off away from the hotel on foot. For a second, I debate what to do. I'll be far more conspicuous following someone on foot if I'm riding my bike, but equally, if she finds a car or eventually jumps into a taxi, then I won't be able to keep up. Which is the worst outcome: taking the bike and potentially getting caught tailing her, or leaving it and potentially losing sight of her?

"Fuck it."

Leaving my bike behind, I set off after the girl. She's walking fast, but her legs are no match for mine, and I keep a distance without losing sight of her. The hard part is not losing sight of her, because Luca wasn't wrong about her. She *is* a shadow. She moves as quietly and furtively as one, sliding in and out of traffic, crowds, side-streets.

It takes more effort than I expected to stay on her tail. Eventually, she makes her way past the big hotels and shiny clubs and pretentious bars, and, to my surprise, she plunges into a staircase to the London Underground.

The Tube, huh?

Takes a particular brand of criminal to use public transport for a getaway vehicle.

I hop on the same train as her, careful to get in a separate carriage, careful to keep an eye on her. She's got a backpack slung on one shoulder, and I realise I have no idea when she got that.

My phone buzzes and I glance down at the screen. A couple of texts from Luca asking me for updates. I ignore them. Nothing from Zahara, even though she must be wondering where I am. She has my number, but her pride would never allow her to text me.

I lock my phone and glance around. Everyone on the Tube sits with their heads bowed, either reading or on their phones. I look at the windows, which the darkness of the underground tunnels has turned to mirrors. In the blurry reflection, I spot the girl.

Except this time, she looks completely different. So different I almost miss her. Again.

The blonde hair is gone; so is the trench coat. Now, she's got dark hair scraped back in a bun and a baggy black jumper. She's sitting slightly crouched over, scribbling notes into a tiny

notebook. When she's done, she shoves it into her pocket and sits back, closing her eyes.

She looks exhausted.

It leaves a bitter taste in my mouth as I follow her across two more trains and a long walk through a part of the London outskirts I've never been to. Here, grand hotels and glass towers are replaced by concrete blocks, graffitied walls and narrow roads. The distant wail of police sirens blots the silence of the night.

I'm reminded, unpleasantly, of Chertanovo.

The way the girl navigates the street, she's in familiar territory. I follow her to a block of flats not unlike the one I call home and watch her go through the main entrance with a wince. The doors to her block don't even have a working lock.

I follow her without any trouble whatsoever, through the broken doors and past the lift with the *Out of Service* piece of paper on it, and up an echoey stairwell that smells like piss and cigarettes. She reaches a door and pulls a set of keys out, disappearing into a flat.

I make a note of her door number and go back downstairs. It's not hard to bust in her letterbox, which has rusted hinges and is packed almost full. There are a ton of flyers for shitty takeaways and local off-licences, which I shove in someone else's letterbox. And then there are piles on piles of letters with red stamps. I tear a few open. Bills, tickets, fines, threats of repossession.

They're almost all addressed to the same name.

*Willow Lynch.*

I stuff one of the letters into my pocket, throw out the rest, and leave the building. Outside, I light a cigarette and take a deep drag. A group of young men in puffy coats watch me from underneath the smashed-in plastic walls of a bike shelter but say nothing. The smell of weed drifts past my nose. Guess rich teens and poor city kids have *one* thing in common.

I drop my head back in a tired exhalation and then look down at my phone. The last text from Luca is an impatient question mark, nothing else.

I look at the address I've written down. The name. *Willow Lynch.* Not a shadow—a real person. A woman every bailiff in London seems to be looking for.

If I send her address to Luca, bailiffs will become the least of all her problems.

This woman is more akin to me than I am to Luca. She reminds me of Blood Moons in Yalinka, the small flat I grew up in, the smell of cooking oil imbibed in yellowed wallpaper, bills stacked, unopened, on a kitchen table. The same way my life was turned upside down by the sudden arrival of a devil in the skin of a man, hers will be if I give Luca her address.

I text Luca back.

**Iakov:** You can't kill her.

**Luca:** So you have her address. Well done.

**Luca:** She'll be fine. Send the address.

**Luca:** You want me to help you find your little sister or not?

I don't respond to any of them. I stare down at my phone without seeing it, trying to picture Lena's face. All I can remember is her tears the day the Blood Wolf beat her up and threw her stuff into the lake and the little watercolour set, robbed of its colour.

That's all I have left of Lena. No features, or expressions, not even her voice. Just her tears and her terror. My phone lights up.

**Luca:** I won't kill her. You have my word.

The word of the devil. What's that worth?

Fuck all, probably.



# Birthday Girl

## Iakov

I DON'T RESPOND TO Luca's message, and he doesn't contact me again. If I didn't know my phone was impossible to track, I would suspect him of just plucking my location from my phone. But Luca is, above all things, a cold-blooded snake.

He has the patience to wait out my guilt.

Phone and hands shoved into my pockets, I head back the way I came from to retrieve my bike. It's almost three in the morning by the time I reach *La Brindille*, and by the looks of things, the party is going strong. Outside the sleek glass doorways of the bar lounge, rich girls and guys in expensive outfits stand smoking cigarettes or joints. Everyone is glassy-eyed, and nobody stops me when I make my way inside.

I sweep the bar with a look. It's an odd group of guests for a young woman's birthday party. There are Zahara's peers, the twenty-something London rich kids, and I even recognise a few Spearcrest alums. But there are also grown adults—especially men. Men who look old enough to be the uncles and fathers—and grandfathers—of the girls they're chatting to.

In short—men who are Zahara's type.

I ram through the room, letting drunk revellers bounce off my shoulders. My eyes search for the familiar sight of brown and gold curls. She's not on the dance floor, or sitting in the

lounge area, or at the bar. A hand grabs my elbow and I turn sharply.

A girl with light brown skin and mirror-smooth black hair looks up at me. She's wearing gold bangles along her forearms and a dress in pale green silk. Her eyes are full of concern. I recognise her immediately.

“Sanvi Dayal.”

“Hi, Iakov,” she says with a polite, distracted smile. “When did you get here? You haven't seen Zaro, have you?”

I shake my head. The worry in her voice is obvious. It makes red alarms go off inside my skull. “Where did you last see her?”

“In the bathroom.” She shakes her head. “She was hiding from her boyfriend.”

“When?”

“About fifteen minutes ago.”

I scan the room again. The music is loud, the air hazy. Everyone is laughing and drinking and dancing like a real celebration, but the birthday girl is nowhere to be seen. There's something a bit sad about that, but I don't linger on it. I turn back to Sanvi.

“Do you think she might have left?”

She shakes her head. “She wouldn't leave without telling us. When we go out, we always make sure Rhiannon gets home

safe first, and then we leave. It's our pact. Zaro would never break it."

"Right." I look around. "Where's Rhiannon?"

Sanvi points to a corner of the dance floor. Sure enough, the redhead Irish wildcard is standing under the glossy fan of a palm tree's leaves, holding drinks in both hands and shouting right into the bewildered face of a guy who looks old enough to be her father.

"What's she doing?" I ask, more than a little impressed by how aggressively she's gesturing without spilling a drop of either of her drinks.

"She's breaking up with Zaro's boyfriend for her," Sanvi says.

I stare at the man Rhiannon is shouting at. More specifically, I stare at his woollen jacket, his beard, his silver hair. He's not an ugly man, dark and distinguished, but he wouldn't look out of place in an opera booth or a work conference.

"*Boyfriend?*" I say.

Sanvi sighs heavily. "Right. Well, exactly."

"You look after her," I tell her, jabbing my chin in the direction of the screaming redhead. "I'll go find Zahara."

"Be nice to her!" Sanvi calls after me as I walk away. "It's her birthday!"

I stick my thumb up and punch it in the air so she can see it.

Like I'm ever anything but nice.



AFTER A FEW MINUTES of barrelling around the bar, down corridors and into every bathroom, I find Zahara sitting on the porch outside. It's clearly out of use; most of the chairs are stacked on the tables and the lights and outdoor heaters are all turned off. I probably would have missed Zahara, if I didn't have that instinct that always pulls me back to her.

The birthday girl sits on the edge of the wooden patio. She's wearing a slinky white dress and white see-through gloves dotted with pearls, so she must be freezing her arse off in the frosty winter night. There's a champagne flute next to her and a box of cupcakes on her lap, and she's holding one and licking the frosting off, her eyes unfocused.

Shrugging my jacket off, I place it on her shoulders and crouch down at her side. She throws me an imperious little glare but keeps my jacket.

"You *said* you'd be at my party."

She doesn't even try to hide her sulky tone. I raise an eyebrow. "I'm here, aren't I?"

She rolls her eyes. "What's the point? You've missed all the fun."

I point at her box of cupcakes. “Looks like all the fun is happening right here.”

“Are you making fun of me?” she says, narrowing her eyes at me.

In the faint street lights coming from the quiet side street and the glowing flicker of a nearby neon sign, Zahara’s face is outlined in all its beauty. The long curl of her eyelashes, the glossy softness of her lips, the smooth polish of her skin. She’s kept her makeup simple, her hair is its own ornament, and the only jewellery she’s wearing are the pearls in her ears and on her gloves.

If I found out she was from another world, I wouldn’t be so surprised. Beauty like this seems too good to exist alongside the rest of us.

“Sorry for being late,” I tell her. “Genuinely. I’m sorry. Something came up. I’m here now.”

For a second, she just watches me. Then she hands me her flute of champagne and a cupcake.

“Right, well, we might as well do a little celebrating,” she says. “Come on, Fido—don’t be afraid to smile.”

I take a bite of the cupcake and a sip of the champagne. “Happy birthday, Zahara.”

She tilts her head to the side, smirks. “You’re not going to sing?”

“If you command me to, I will. Don’t I always obey you?”

She's silent for a moment. She opens her mouth as if to say something, the wreath of her warm breath curling then vanishing in the cold air. Then she licks her lips and says, "You don't have to sing. You give me the impression of someone who would be terrible at it. I bet you sing off-key."

"Probably."

"Anything I command, though?" she says, a glint of wickedness in her smoky voice. "That's what you said, isn't it?"

She looks like she's about to command me to do something outrageous or cruel or indecent, but who am I to refuse her?

"It's your birthday," I say with a shrug.

"Give me a kiss, then." She taps her forefinger on her cheek. The gold of her nail polish catches the light through the snowy gauze of her glove. Her cheek is a smooth expanse of skin, stray glitter freckling it. "For my birthday."

Zahara Blackwood is more dangerous and intimidating than staring down the barrel of a gun.

But I still bite the bullet.

I lean down to drop a quick kiss on her cheek. She turns at the last minute and catches the kiss on her lips. Her mouth is soft and wet. She tastes like icing sugar and blackberries and champagne. I pull back sharply.

"*Zahara*," I say in a low tone of warning.

“It’s my birthday, isn’t it?” she asks in a murmur. “And am I not your mistress, after all, even if I’m such a cruel one?”

“Just because you have power doesn’t mean you should abuse it.”

She lets out a rasping laugh. “Why not? Everybody else does.”

Can’t exactly argue with her on that. I set down her flute of champagne and cupcake and settle myself next to her.

“You’ve a bar full of people here to celebrate with you. Why are you here?”

“Because—” She starts off confident, and that confidence fades straightaway. “Because... I’m avoiding my boyfriend.”

“Don’t think you have to worry about him,” I tell her. “Your mate Rhiannon’s broken up with him for you by the looks of things.”

She sighs. “It’s not that easy.”

“Yea. It is.”

“In your world, maybe. But here, in Zahara’s world, people don’t just stay away from you because you want them gone.”

“You want him gone?” I stand up. “Then he’s gone, Kolyuchka.”

She looks up at me with widened eyes. “Wait!”

I look down at her and wait.

“I want to go home,” she says, small and sulky. “I’m not having fun.”



“Then let’s go.”

“Just like that?” she says.

“Just like that.”

I outstretch my hand and when she takes it, I pull her up. I grab her box of cupcakes, put my arm around her waist, and I get her out of there. Her friends try to talk to her, as do some of the old men who should be at home watching the news over a spaghetti dinner, but I keep moving her through the crowd, shielding her body with mine.

Sanvi and Rhiannon catch up with Zahara just as we walk out of the bar, and I tell them we’re leaving and to make sure they take a cab home together. They kiss Zahara goodbye and wish her happy birthday and reassure her they’ll text her when they get home.

Outside, the night is loud and cold, so I make sure my jacket is wrapped securely around Zahara before leading her to my bike, which I left parked in the middle of the pavement in my rush to find her earlier. We’ve just reached the bike when a hand taps my shoulder.

I turn around to find myself face to face with the older guy from earlier, the one Rhiannon was shouting at. He’s frowning through his glasses and a strand of his grey hair has fallen over his forehead.

“Who are you?” he says to me, puffing his chest. “Get your hands off my—”

Since Zahara doesn't specifically command me *not* to, I boot the guy squarely in the chest. He goes flying back onto the pavement like a goon in an action movie. Around us, everyone's frozen in shock, watching the scene unfold with glassy eyes and slack mouths. I don't give a fuck.

"She's not your anything," I tell him, looking down at him like he's a pile of dog shit someone forgot to scoop up. "Stick to people your age, old man. And stay the fuck away from her."

I don't need to make a specific threat; the man scrambles back like he's seen the devil. I turn back to my bike and secure my helmet on Zahara's head, hiding the guilty look on her face behind the black visor. And then I take her home.

Not Yours

## Zahara

IAKOV CARRIES ME FROM where he parked his bike all the way into my apartment, but he stops outside my bedroom door. He sets me on my feet and steps away, fixing me with those bleak black eyes of his.

“You should get some sleep,” he says, turning to go to his room.

“Wait.”

He stops. He waits.

Iakov never disobeys me. How far would I need to push him before he says no?

“Help me take my shoes off,” I tell him.

I’m wearing Jimmy Choo pumps with simple embellished ankle straps. They’re not hard to take off, and I’m not anywhere near as drunk as I would need to be to lose the ability to take off my own shoes.

But Iakov either doesn’t realise, or he doesn’t care. And if there’s a limit to his obedience, this doesn’t cross it; he crouches at my feet without hesitation. His big fingers fumble for a moment with the tiny straps, brushing my ankles as they do so.

His touch is warm, considering how cold it is outside. I realise I’ve never once known Iakov to be anything but warm, as if his body is powered by an ever-burning furnace.

I balance myself on his shoulder to step out of my heels. He doesn't stand back up until I've let go. Picking my shoes up, I open my bedroom door and gesture with my chin.

“Come in. Sit down.”

He follows me into my bedroom and drops heavily down at the edge of my bed. The bulk and darkness of him, his black clothes and big boots and buzz cut clash horribly with the pearl-white and gilt gold of the decor. Iakov's always been a sight for sore eyes, but if he's a broken, damaged thing, then he's *my* broken, damaged thing, and doesn't that count for something?

I toss my shoes down by the full-length mirror tucked next to my vanity table. I stand in front of Iakov, my back to him.

“Unzip me, please.”

He does so with the same deft swiftness as when he's giving me self-defence lessons. Like he's trying to touch me as briefly as possible, always retreating behind the invisible wall separating us.

I turn to face him, letting my dress slide down my body. Underneath it, I'm wearing a plain set of ivory silk underwear. Iakov's gaze stays firmly on mine. I can't read a thing in the narrow obsidian slits of his eyes—but I *can* see the jumping muscle in his jaw.

I step closer to him, and he shuffles back on the bed. Good. I straddle his legs, settling myself down on his lap. He leans back but doesn't say anything; his eyes fixed on mine like a

thunderbolt will strike his heart if he looks away. Pushing my curls back, I stretch my head to the side.

“Take off my earring.”

He obeys. His fingertips brush my neck, the brief touch sending a shiver through me. I turn my head and let him take off the other earring. He hands me both and I toss them carelessly aside on the bed. But I don't move.

He finally speaks.

“*Zahara.*”

My name, in that same rough tone of warning as earlier.

“I just want a kiss,” I tell him, setting my hands on his shoulders. It's a lie, of course. I want so much more than that—I want—I don't even know what I want. But it's Iakov who never lies, not me, and so I lie with abandon. “Just one kiss, that's all. You can leave straight after and never have to think about it ever again.”

Is it begging, I wonder, if I know he wants this as much as I do?

Because he does. Iakov's solid and immovable as stone, but stone doesn't blush, and there's a redness spreading in the carved valley of Iakov's cheeks. His lips are slightly parted, and his breath is a short, sharp pant, and there's something hard brushing my inner thigh where I'm straddling him.

“This isn't what you want,” he says.

“But it's what *you* want,” I reply.

“You don’t know what I want.”

It’s not the first time he’s said this to me. But how can I know what he wants if he never tells me?

Reaching between us, I slide my palm over the hard bulge between his legs. Oh, I might not know what he wants but I can guess some of it. He takes my wrist roughly, pulling it away. I lean into him and breathe against his ear.

“Just one kiss.” I pull back and smirk down at him. “You owe me a birthday present, after all.”

He reaches into his pocket, forcing me to grab his shoulders to keep myself balanced on top of him. He pulls out a small box, wrapped plainly in brown parcel paper, and hands it to me.

“Birthday present.”

I toss it aside on the bed, just like I did with the earrings.

“Not the one I want.”

He stares up at me, but I refuse to look away, smashing the force of my will against his to see which will shatter first. The muscles in his jaws jump, and something dark and feral flashes in his eyes.

And then his hand flattens against the low of my back, pulling me roughly to him, and his mouth is on mine. He tastes like smoke and metal; his kiss is harsh with anger. But two can play that game; there’s as much anger in my soul as there is in his.

I grab his neck, digging my nails into his skin. I suck on his bottom lip and bite it until we can both taste the rusty tang of blood. When his mouth falls open with a low grunt, I slide my tongue against his. He doesn't make a noise then, but his fingers curl into my back, his erection strains against my thigh. I roll my hips into his, grinding myself against the hardness of him. The silk of my panties is slick with wetness—I don't remember the last time I was this turned on. I realise that if I keep kissing him and grinding myself on him, I'm going to come.

It's not just him, and the anger in his kiss, and the desire he's restraining. It's *me*. It's how I feel when I'm around him, like I'm not just beautiful but powerful, like I'm the one in control, like I'm safe enough to allow myself to be completely untethered.

And just like that, the kiss changes.

The taste of blood is still in my mouth, but Iakov's lips are gorgeously soft and pliant. His tongue glides against mine, slow and sensual. His fingers are no longer curled into my skin, but stroking the low of my back, sending pleasure flaring through me like sparks from a fire.

Drunk with satisfaction, bold with hunger, I reach between us, my fingers finding his waistband, pulling on his belt to unbuckle it.

“No.”

Iakov ends the kiss so sharply it startles me, breaking the string of saliva that connects our tongues for a split second.



His hands shoot up to grab my arms, pushing me firmly off him and onto the bed. I fall back, my chest rising and falling as I try to catch my breath. Iakov's already on his feet, buckling his belt back up.

"No," he repeats, his voice a growl, his eyes wild.

He wipes his lips with the back of his hand, smearing a trail of blood across his cheeks. I have the fleeting, distracted thought that I didn't mean to bite him so hard.

"We can't do this."

I prop myself up on my elbows. "Yes, we can."

"You're Zach's *sister*," he bites out.

"Not *yours*," I bite back.

He stares at me for a moment. The inexpressive marble of his face is transformed, an exquisite mask of pain and shame and *want*.

"No," he grits out between clenched teeth. "I won't cross that line."

"We'll see." I arch my back, running my hands down the length of my body. "Goodnight, then, Fido. Try not to cross any lines when you dream of me."

He turns and runs away, and I smile at his retreating back. Who would have thought rejection could feel so very much like victory?



THE FOLLOWING MORNING BRINGS with it a fresh wave of guilt. I couldn't say that I regret what I did, but torturing Iakov Kavinski has always been an occupation of mingled pleasure and shame.

A ray of pale morning sunlight crosses the length of my bed and I roll out of its way for the sake of my eyes, which are still adjusting. When I throw my arms up in a stretch, my elbow bumps against something tucked into my pillows. I pull it out, frowning. A small box, wrapped plainly in brown parcel paper. My name is scribbled on the side of the box in a black scrawl.

I sit bolt upright, curls bouncing against my shoulders, and stare down at the box.

Another wave of guilt hits me when I remember Iakov handing me the box last night. I didn't expect him to give me a birthday present—I've never once given *him* one—and I didn't even thank him for it.

My fingers shake slightly when I unwrap the box. Inside is a small black case, and a tiny white card falls out from under the wrapper. I open it.

*Roses have thorns to keep them safe.*

*It's what makes them special. Hurt the*

*fuckers who want to hurt you.*

*Happy birthday.*

He's not bothered to sign it.

I open the box. Inside a cushion of black felt is a small switchblade, black and gold, with an ornate handle. When closed, it fits perfectly in my hand. I flick it open. The blade is smooth, the edge glints dangerously. I turn the handle in my palm. Engraved in gold is a Russian word.

*Колючка.*

# BOOK THREE



*Cruelty  
&  
Candour*



# Depressing Fuckers

## Iakov

AVOIDING THE PERSON YOU live with and swore to protect isn't an easy task, but I manage it for almost a whole week. It gets easier once Zahara is back at university since she has exams coming up in December and that dissertation of hers she's always working on when she can't sleep.

I try to keep just as busy. If I'm not hustling the security staff of businesses and townhouses on the street for security footage, I'm training or reading that damn Plato book.

Anything to keep my mind occupied because the second it's not, memories of the night of Zahara's birthday come flooding in, and that only ever ends in cold showers and hot shame.

The more time passes, the more I'm ashamed. When Zach texts me to ask how things are going, I can't even look at his name on my phone. What would he think if he knew I almost fucked his sister in her bed? He'd think I'm a worthless piece of shit. He'd *know* I'm a worthless piece of shit.

A worthless piece of shit who let his best friend's sister straddle his lap in her tiny silk underwear and kissed her like he was dying and the fucking elixir of life was on her tongue.

Fuck, and I would've fucked her, too, if it wasn't for that one thin thread of willpower I had left. I would've fucked until all her body knew was pleasure, I would've fucked all that sadness right out of her eyes.

The things I would do to that girl—if she was mine to have.

But she's not.

And she never will be.



SINCE MY HEAD IS now one endless collection of shit to feel guilty about, my insomnia is in full force. Long nights spent tossing and turning and smoking and drinking and banging my head against the metal railing of the balcony and trying to read Plato or playing games on my phone or scrolling social media or just staring at the wall hoping, just fucking hoping the ceiling will cave in on top of me and knock me flat out. And when I end up finally falling asleep, usually long after the morning sun comes up, I sleep fitfully, because all my dreams are just nightmares.

Black lakes or bloody fists or washed-out watercolour sets or red moons or pale satin underwear and smooth brown skin and gold fingernails piercing into my back. I wake up every morning feeling like my eyes are full of sand and my bones are made of corroded iron.

About a week after the birthday party, I'm lying flat on my bedroom floor with the windows wide open, head propped on my bag and Zach's stupid book in my hands, when the door opens.



Zahara enters with the confidence of a woman for whom the rules mean nothing at all. She's wearing a pink satin bralette and shorts set, but at least she's got a fluffy white cardigan wrapped over it. Small mercies from my cruel mistress.

"You're still awake?" she asks, even though she clearly expected me to be.

I glance at my watch. It's a little past one. This isn't even late by my standards.

"Yea," I say, looking back at my book so I don't have to look at her body or remember the way it felt on top of me, the way the curve of her spine fit under my hand, how hot and soft she felt against my hard cock even through my pants or how good her mouth tasted or just how goddam beautiful she is, a beauty like a punch to the face and I just want her to knock me out.

She walks over and prods my book lightly with her foot. Her toenails are also painted light gold. A colour that perfectly complements her skin—a colour that haunts my mind.

"Plato," I say.

"As if *you* have what it takes to read Plato," she sneers. She crosses her arms over her chest, clearly cold from the wind coming in from the open windows. She stares down at me, and I'd stand up if I didn't think Zahara just loves the feeling she gets from towering over me like this.

"You calling me dumb?" I ask lightly. "Nice. That's the nicest of all your insults."

“Your tough act doesn’t work on me, Fido,” she says. “And frankly, it’s getting a little boring.”

“You want me to be soft and tearful and tell you all my deep dark secrets?”

“Only interesting people have secrets,” she says. “You’re too boring for all that. Just a boring, grumpy, joyless bore of a man. You should consider priesthood.”

She sits on the edge of my bed. Still looking down at me, she kicks her foot into my book, repeatedly, though not hard enough to send the book flying. Just enough to keep me from being able to read—just enough to keep my attention on her.

“That why you came here?” I ask her, ignoring her priesthood jab because I’m not too dumb to know a trap when I see one. “Need me to *bore* you to sleep?”

She lets out a reluctant laugh. With that smoky voice of hers, even laughter is sultry. Her legs go still, and then she tips herself back so she’s lying on the bed and I can’t see her face anymore. Another small mercy.

“It’ll take more than your soul-crushing monotone and tedious personality to defeat my insomnia,” she says from the bed. “But you may try. It’s not like anything else is working these days.”

Well, at least I’m not the only one suffering from insomnia. I flick to a random page in the book and read, slowly and without inflexion.

“ ‘What of this line, “O heavy with wine, who hast the eyes of a dog and the heart of a stag,” and of the words which follow? Would you say that these, or any similar impertinences which private individuals are supposed to address to their rulers, whether in verse or prose, are well or ill spoken? ’ ”

Zahara interrupts me with another little kick to the book. “Dear god, stop! Your reading is horrendous—so much worse than I expected. Do you even understand what you’re reading?”

“No.”

“Why on earth are you reading Plato anyway?” she asks. “Where did someone like you even find a book like that?”

I close the book and stare at the cover, which is an old painting of what I can only guess to be Athens. “Zach lent it to me.” I swallow. It feels fucked-up to even say his name. “He says it’s the perfect introduction to philosophy.”

Zahara laughs out loud. This time, her laughter comes out musical and husky. She has a good voice for laughter, and yet it’s not a sound I hear anywhere near often enough.

“Since when do you care about philosophy?” she asks.

“I don’t. I care about Zach.”

She’s silent for a long moment. My chest feels weirdly full, weirdly tense, weirdly empty. Emotions crowd and fight in the pit of my heart, but no victor emerges.

Zahara sits suddenly back up and glares down at me.

“What is it with you two anyway? I don’t understand it. You two have nothing in common.”

“I don’t like him because he’s like me,” I tell her. “I like him because he’s *not*. He’s better than me in every way. That’s why I like him. He makes me feel like maybe I can be a better person, even for a bit. That’s it.”

She curls her lips in a cruel smile. “And what does *he* see in *you*, then?”

I look up at her. I’m silent for a long moment. If I knew what she wanted me to say, I’d say it. But I don’t. So I tell her the truth.

“I have no idea. Nothing, probably.”

“You’re so pathetic,” she says. “Why are you like this? You could go anywhere you want, be whoever you want, do whatever you want. You’re not a beaten dog—you’re young, strong, good-looking. You could be happy if you chose to be. So why do you choose to be so fucking depressing?”

She kicks the book, this time hard enough to send it flying out of my hands. It lands on the floor on crumpled pages. I rear up onto my knees, right in front of her. Even with me on my knees and her sitting on the edge of the bed, I’m almost as tall as her. She looks down at me, eyes wide.

But not in fear.

“What about *your* choices, Zahara?” I ask her, pinning her gaze under mine, daring her to look away. “If *I* choose to be

depressing, then what do *you* choose? To let men kick at your heart until it's a puddle of blood at their feet?"

"You don't get to judge me," she says, a shiver of fury shaking her voice.

"I *never* judge you," I bite out. "I see you as you are; I *like* you as you are. All your emptiness and sadness and hunger and pain. I like it all. It's dark and dirty and real, like everything in my life. *You're* the only one judging yourself."

Her eyes glitter with pain, like the cartoon eyes of an orphaned fawn. Her bottom lip trembles.

"I'm not sad," she says finally.

"*Liar*," I whisper. I grin up into her glare. "Beautiful fucking liar. You're just as sad and lonely as the rest of us depressing fuckers."

"No, I'm not."

"If you weren't, you wouldn't be here." I look her up and down, slowly and openly, from her hair in its silk scarf to the golden tips of her toes, along the long, lush lines of her body. "You wouldn't have made your way to my bed in the middle of the night."

She licks her lips in a nervous gesture, then bites down as if to punish herself. The air between us, always so thick with tension and want and anger, is almost unbearable. Despite the cold wind rushing through the open window, the room is suddenly too small, too cramped, too hot.

“It’s not *your* bed,” Zahara says with a spiteful little tilt of her chin.

“It’s not yours either, Kolyuchka.” She opens her mouth, but I stand up before she can speak. “If *I* ever slept in *your* bed, you would know.”

Now she’s the one looking up at me. And now I think we’re both realising the danger of the situation. Me, topless in my room, wracked with guilt and lust, unable to sleep and unable to come. Her, in her satin pyjamas on my bed, cruel with beauty, hungry for something nobody in this world seems capable of giving her.

“You should leave,” I tell her more gently.

But she doesn’t. Instead, she lies back on my bed—*her* bed, *the* bed, whatever she wants to call it—propping herself on her elbows. The pale cardigan slips from one shoulder, falls to gather in the crook of her arm. She looks up at me full of that cocky confidence of hers, that confidence she uses like the flashing of a naked blade.

“Or what?” she says. Her voice is gentle too—for once. “You’re not going to touch me.” She smiles, a curious smile, full of both cruelty and bitterness. “No matter how much you want to.”

“I won’t touch you,” I tell her. I never lie to Zahara, but when I say the words, it’s not because I *know* them to be the truth, it’s because I *need* them to be the truth. “I won’t betray the only true friend I have.”

“You’re not saying you don’t want me,” she says.

Her voice is still low and husky and confident, but this time, it catches.

“I won’t betray Zach,” I tell her again.

Triumph flashes across her face. It makes her look wicked and pleased in a way I rarely see her. She stretches herself out on the bed, arms up, toes pointed. Her cardigan falls open, her breasts stretch the satin of her bralette to a gem-like sheen. My eyes flick down—her nipples are hard—and back up to her face.

“You’d never betray my brother,” she says, her husky voice furling itself around me like smoke. “So you won’t mind if I sleep here.”

I watch her for a moment, measuring the danger of the situation. Then I yank the pillow out from under her, dropping it on the floor by the bed.

“Sure. I’ll sleep on the floor, then.”

Good Life



## Iakov

THE ROOM REMAINS SILENT for so long I'm sure Zahara must have glared and seethed and writhed herself asleep. My gorgeous tormentor, always burning up with anger and pain and need. If only I could give her what she needs.

Almost an hour passes, with nothing to occupy me but the sighing of the wind and the rustle of plant leaves brushing each other in the darkness of the room. The icy cold washes over me, spreading a comforting numbness through my body. My mind spins around my carousel of dread, all my familiar fears like porcelain ghosts on silver poles.

*I'll sell out the girl in the concrete tower, Willow Lynch, and it'll all be for nothing.*

*Because I'll never find or save Lena, and I'll live a slave to my father's will for the rest of my worthless life.*

*When he's done with me, I'll die in some ditch somewhere, just another anonymous thug.*

*Before that, Zach will find out how broken and empty and fucked-up I am. He'll find out I betrayed him and he'll distance himself from me until I'm forced to keep an eye on him from afar like that creepy fucker Luca.*

*I'll be alone forever, an animal without a pack, without a home.*

*I'll fail to protect Zahara from every fucker who wants to hurt her, and something terrible is going to happen when I'm no longer there to stop it. She'll be forever sad, and I'll be forever unable to save her.*

I close my eyes, trying to push the thoughts away, sinking deeper into them. Deep in that darkness, the pale blur of a face appears.

The old woman in the lake in Yalinka. She's been visiting me often of late, finding me in the limbo between waking and sleeping. Her mouth gapes open, black like the black egg of my death, which waits in the centre of my chest.

*Iakov, she says, you belong to the abyss. It waits for you. Aren't you tired of waiting? It's easier if you don't fight. It's easier with your pockets full of stones.*

Her fingers reach for my throat and clasp it in a cold, clammy grip. I start, my entire body jerking, eyes flying open. My heart beats fast, a disorientating gong in my chest.

“Are you asleep?”

Zahara's voice reaches me from the bed, so quiet and dreamy I wonder for a moment if I imagined it.

“No,” I answer just as quietly.

“Why not?”

“Because I can't.”

Another moment of silence. “Why not?”

I glance out of the window, at the starless sky and the dull glow of faraway lamplight.

“Why don’t you tell me, Kolyuchka?”

“How should I know?”

“You know everything, don’t you?”

She laughs, low and bitter. “I’m not Zachary.”

*I know you’re not*, I think. Out loud, I say, “Why aren’t *you* asleep?”

She doesn’t answer for a long while. The silence stretches, the black rush of a river running between us, rushing us to opposite sides.

“Because,” she answers finally, so quietly I have to strain to hear her, “the nights are unbearably long and my head is an unbearable place to be in.”

“Mine too.”

She’s silent for another long moment, and then I hear the rustle of movement and her head appears over the edge of the bed. Lit by nothing except the dull glow from the streetlights down below, her face is hazy with shadows, her silk scarf gleaming like a crown.

“Really?” she whispers.

I don’t know why she’s whispering since there are only the two of us in the flat, and neither of us is asleep nor even on the verge of sleep. I nod.

“Yea.” I close my eyes. “What’s the scariest thing in your head, Zahara?”

I don’t expect her to answer, but she does.

“Probably that my father will never forgive me for what happened in St Agnes. That he’ll never love me again and because of that, nobody else ever will.”

So this is it, the singularity in the black hole of sadness inside Zahara Blackwood’s heart. That painful point of infinite density from which nothing can escape, not even all of the light and beauty of her.

“Your father loves you,” I tell her. “Probably everyone can see it but you.”

“Not like he used to.”

“So what? Even if he didn’t love you. Even if he hated you? So what? It’s not gonna stop anyone else from loving you.”

“Then what’s stopping them?” she says.

“It’s not. Zach and Theo love you. Sanvi and Rhiannon love you.”

*I love you.*

*All the beauty of you, all the thorns, too.*

She’s silent, processing what I’ve told her. She doesn’t contradict me. Instead, she asks, “What’s the scariest thing in *your* head, then?”

“That I’ll fail to protect those I love,” I tell her because I never lie to her. “That death is the only thing I’m good for.”

She gives a little scoff, but the sound isn't as venomous as it normally is. "Please. You're not even afraid to die."

"I'm not afraid to die. I just don't *want* to."

She watches me, the dark fans of her eyelashes moving slowly up and down. Then she lies back, her head disappearing from view, her curls along with it.

"What is it you want, then?" she asks. "You've never said."

"What everyone else wants, probably. To be free, to be happy. To love and to be loved. To be a good person and live a good life. Normal shit."

"Normal shit," she repeats.

"Isn't that what *you* want?" I ask her.

She's silent for so long this time that I'm certain she's fallen asleep. I roll over onto my side, to give my back a bit of relief. I know what Zahara Blackwood wants anyway, and it wouldn't even be difficult to give it to her.

Then she speaks again. "If I turn on the lamp, will you keep reading to me?"

"What—Plato?"

"Yes."

I laugh and reach for the book where I set it aside after she kicked it out of my hand. "Yea, alright."

"Really?"

The lamp on the other bedside table comes on. The light is dim, just enough for me to make out the pages.

“Yea, really,” I tell her. “I’ll do anything you want me to. Always. No matter what.”

“No matter what?” she mumbles impishly.

I open a page at random and start reading. Either she falls asleep, or she’s too sulky to say anything else; Zahara doesn’t say another word for the rest of the night.



SHE’S GONE FROM MY bed when I wake up in the early morning. The window’s closed, and there’s a blanket on top of me and a pillow under my head instead of my bag. I don’t remember her doing any of this. Plato’s *Republic* is lying closed next to my head.

I stand up and stretch with a grunt, my bones cracking. Dropping into the bed, I roll into the blankets. The bed smells of Zahara, of her perfume and her hair and her skin. It smells like a dessert, like a rich girl who would taste like macarons and blackberries and ganache. I fall back asleep and wake up so hard my hand is already halfway down my boxers before I catch myself.

I jump out of bed and take an ice-cold shower. I get dressed and check my phone over breakfast. There are a couple more texts from Zach asking me to confirm if I’m still alive. Nothing new from Luca. A text from Sev asking me if it

would be lame to propose to his fiancée. I smile despite myself.

“Stupid fuck,” I mutter to my phone.

It’s hard not to want what he has. What they *all* have. Sev and his pretty artist fiancée, Evan and his smart-mouth lawyer Sophie Sutton, Zach and his soulmate Theodora. None of them know how lucky they are. Even Luca does alright, I bet, despite being a sadistic fuck with no soul.

While I’m just a lonely insomniac forced to ignore my hard-ons so my best friend’s little sister doesn’t walk in on me palming myself to the thought of her sad eyes and gorgeous face.

I shamefully text Zach back that I’m alive and that everything’s going so far (it’s somehow both an overstatement and understatement at the same time), and then I text Sev back.

**Iakov:** Propose to her after sex. Women make their worst decisions post-orgasm.

He replies immediately.

**Sev:** You’re a comedian now??

And then, a few moments later:

**Sev:** Good idea still. You’re definitely best man at my wedding.

I roll my eyes but I laugh out loud.

Then, there are two more texts waiting for my attention. They've been sitting in my notifications, lurking like waiting monsters. Both are from Anton.

One is from a week or so ago.

**Anton:** What the fuck have you done? You told me you were gonna sort it out.

The other is from two days ago.

**Anton:** Your father's in London. Only God can help you now, patsan.

But if God does exist, I'm pretty sure he hates me about as much as my father does.



Lucky Guy

## **Iakov**

THE FOLLOWING DAY, I stake out the journo's address to make sure he's gone or at least lying low. He doesn't appear, so I can only hope he took my warning seriously.

After that, I spend some time flipping the letter I stole from Willow Lynch's letterbox in my hand. Give her up or not? Give her up or not? I can't stay under my father's control forever. But what kind of man would give up one woman for another? As far as I'm concerned, Lena is safe wherever she is. Willow Lynch won't be the moment Luca knows how to find her.

In the end, I stuff the letter back in my pocket and go for a run, hoping the harsh winter air clears my head a bit. When I get back to the apartment that evening, I bump into Zahara on her way out.

I stop in my tracks, standing in the apartment doorway as she shoves a tiny bottle of perfume, a gold compact mirror and lipstick into the tiniest purse I've ever seen in my life.

"Hot date?" I ask.

"Oh yes, can you tell?" she says, tossing me a smirk over her shoulder.

I can tell. She's wearing a dress in a rich brown colour that perfectly matches her skin, the fabric moulding her body like it was carved onto her. Her hair is half-up, half-down, brown and

gold curls cascading down her back. She's wearing gold jewellery, and her makeup is simple—glossy lips and shimmery eyeshadow. Her heels are the colour of ivory, the same colour as her purse.

“Lucky guy,” I tell her, even though my insides feel like I've just swallowed a fistful of thorns.

She hitches her bag over her shoulder, grabs her black coat and turns to look at me. “Since Rhiannon broke up with James and you kicked him into the ground—not sure if you remember that, it made gossip news, by the way—I suppose I may as well get back on the dating scene.”

My fingers try to curl into fists, but I force them to stay still. Can't be jealous of a girl who's not mine. Can't be jealous of a girl I can't have. Can't be jealous of my best friend's sister.

Like I don't have enough problems already.

“Right,” I say. “Don't feel like you gotta explain yourself to me, Kolyuchka.”

“I don't.” She glares at me and gives a prim little headshake. “I'm just keeping you informed.”

I shrug. “Like I said. Lucky guy.”

She steps up to me, and I can't tell whether she's trying to get out of the door or trying to square up to me. She has that smirk on her face like she'd like nothing more than to cut me open and wear my blood like lipstick. “You don't think that.”

“I never lie to you.”

“Oh yes, of course.” She steps right up to me until she’s close enough that all I can smell is her perfume, and all I can see is the glimmer of her lips and the brown of her eyes, and her chest is pressed up to mine. “Wish me well, then, Fido. Let’s hope I get some action tonight, right?”

I push her away from me with the length of my thigh, and she looks down, lips parting in surprise. I raise her chin with one finger, forcing her to look back up.

“I hope your date’s dick shrivels and falls off.”

She lets out a splutter of half-shock, half-laughter, pulling her head back. “You idiot, don’t say that! You’re just jealous because he’s dating and all you do all day is think about death and masturbate sadly.”

I can’t help it. I laugh. Then I step out of her way. “Stay safe, Zahara.”

“Don’t sound so sinister,” she says, waving a hand at me. “I’ll be fine.”

She brushes past me, and I stop her with a hand on her waist. She freezes. Her skin is warm through the fabric of her dress, and for a moment I have to resist the urge to curl my fingers into the flesh of her waist, to pull her flush against me. There’s something about her that makes me want to wrap myself around her like armour, to hold her hard and tight and long.

If only life hadn’t put so many thorns between us.

So instead, I reach against her to take her phone from her hand. I type in my phone number and save it in her contacts.

“Call me,” I say, placing her phone back into her hand. “If you need me, call me. I’ll come for you.”

She swallows, her throat shuddering. “Let go,” she says, low and breathless.

I drop my hand from her waist. I had forgotten it was still there. She steps away and looks at me with wide eyes. Eyes full of uncertainty and need and desire and fear.

“Don’t wait up!” she says finally, in a gasp, and turns and runs off down the corridor.



MY INSTINCT IS TO follow her on her date and make sure this date doesn’t turn into another shitty ex on Zahara’s roster of shitty exes. But she already feels stifled enough as it is, and since things between us have been going—if not well—better, I’d rather not give her more reasons to hate me.

After she leaves, I eat, take another cold shower, get dressed and crack open a bottle of vodka. I can’t face Plato’s *Republic* any longer, so I go into Zahara’s living room and look through her books. A lot of history, a lot of classics, and a lot of romance. No surprise there. She loved those when she was sixteen; I remember being whacked with the spines of pirate romances on more than one occasion.

I pull out the books from the shelves, glancing at the covers. Illustrated couples, girls with long hair swooning in the arms of big buff men with gleaming muscles and intense eyes. If these are the men she reads about, then why the fuck does she keep settling for all those creepy fucks?

With a scoff, I wedge a particularly horny-looking book under my arm and amble into the kitchen. I rifle past Zahara's pricey booze for some of her posh biscuits. When I'm done, I resist the temptation to search through her bedroom for my knife, which she still hasn't given me back. Even though I know she's definitely opened my birthday present.

Little witch.

I head back to my room and spend the evening knocking back vodka and reading about a spirited countess's misadventures with a foul-mouthed highwayman. I'd rather be playing video games, but the slutty highwayman sure beats Plato on the entertainment factor.

I must have drifted into a stupor; I'm startled awake by the sound of the front door slamming shut.

My eyes fly open, but I stay completely still on the bed. In the corridor, I hear a sharp "Shush!" and some stifled giggles. Footsteps, two voices whispering. One male, one female. Zahara's voice emerges, the clearer of the two, "Nobody—just my loser flatmate. Sh. Come on."

The footsteps pass my door, and I hear glasses clinking in the kitchen, more voices, more giggles. Music comes on, the

sultry crooning of a female singer drowning out whatever conversation Zahara's having with her date.

For someone so shrewd, Zahara is really fucking transparent. She loves her flat, it's her sanctuary. She wouldn't bring a boyfriend back here, let alone some random date. If there's a man in her home right now, it's because of me.

I open my door and go into the corridor, but not into the living room. Not that I need to. I can see what I need to see perfectly well from my doorway.

Shoulder against the wall, I cross my arms and watch Zahara. Her date is sitting on the velvet armchair that faces away from the corridor, towards the windows. But Zahara is straddling his lap, her back to the windows. She's kissing him, her arms around his neck. She glances up and gazes at me from under heavy, shimmering eyelids.

This isn't the first time Zahara's kissed someone in front of me, but it's always the same show. The open, glossy lips, the half-lidded eyes, the arched back. Pornstar pleasure, a polished performance.

But always *just* a performance.

All Zahara knows about real pleasure is what she's read in her books and what she's seen on television screens. Her performances are beautiful but empty.

I'm sure her date doesn't notice, though. He seems perfectly content to receive her kisses. He doesn't notice that her attention isn't even on him. Zahara watches me watching her,

fire in her eyes. All that fire, all that passion, all trapped inside her because she doesn't know how to choose someone who'll draw it out.

She pulls away from her date, her gaze turning a glare. "Enjoying the show?" she asks in a sharp gasp.

"P—pardon?" her date says. The accent and voice tell me everything I need to know about him. Looks like Zahara's not strayed very far from her usual type.

"Nothing," she says. She looks down at him with a smile like a painting. "Just my sexually frustrated flatmate. Come on, let's go to my bedroom."

She takes him by the hand and leads him to her door. The man follows her obediently. Both their eyes are a little glazed. They've both had about as much to drink as I've had by the looks of it. When they walk past me, the man gives me a confused look. The greying hair near his temples and the tassels on his moccasins tell me he's not going to have the guts to say anything to me.

Zahara tugs on his hand and pulls him through her door.

"Are you sure this is...?" he says with a posh accent and a slight frown.

She wraps her arms around his neck and says in a breathless voice, "Please, I can't wait any longer. I *need* you."

I laugh out loud, and she slams her door in my laughing face.

The rest of the night is just cigarettes, vodka, and the smoky music of Zahara's fake moans.



Ugly Colour

## Zahara

I BLINK INTO THE pale light of the winter morning and a fresh wave of self-hatred washes over me. Bringing Gerald back home after our date was a mistake, though it didn't feel like one last night. I was so desperate to strike a blow at Iakov, to be the one to throw *him* off-balance for once. And Gerald, though a perfect gentleman, wasn't exactly the most scintillating conversationalist.

Bringing him home felt like the lesser of all evils.

Or it felt that way until Iakov laughed at me from the shadows of the corridor.

That utter *bastard*.

The worst thing of all is that last night was probably the best sex I've ever had, though not thanks to Gerald's technique. I was on top the whole time, and his eyes were tightly closed, as if he was concentrating deeply on something.

But my eyes were closed too, and my fingers curled tight around the edge of the headboard, and my mind was a mess of blurred images. Black snakes and bruised knuckles. Black eyes and mirthless laughter. A knife flicking open and bloodied lips. A hand splayed on the low of my back, tattooed fingers digging into my skin.

What did kissing Iakov Kavinski feel like again?

Like blood and ash and desire and regret.

Like I could've died kissing him.

I roll over in bed and find myself face to face with Gerald. He's still asleep. His mouth is slack, his hair ruffled to one side. In the cold daylight, he looks so much older than he did yesterday. He looks like James.

I jerk back in a sudden shudder of disgust. Half-throwing myself out of bed, I grab a dressing gown and rush out of my room. I'm still fastening the silk belt around my waist when I stumble into the kitchen.

I stop dead in my tracks. Iakov is sitting at the kitchen island. He's got a book in one hand—*The Sinful Scoundrel*—and a cup of black coffee in the other. He looks up at me and raises an eyebrow. I hold my breath, ready to fight him to the death if he says anything—anything at all—about—

“Are you alright?”

His words punch all of the aggression and defensiveness out of me. I let out a sigh and slump down onto a stool, dropping my face into my palms.

“I don't know how to get rid of him. How do you politely ask a man to—”

Iakov moves before I even finish my sentence. He heads straight into my bedroom, grabbing Gerald's jacket off the back of the chair where we made out yesterday. Wide-eyed, I watch him from the corridor as he pulls Gerald up by the shoulder and shoves his clothes into his chest.

“Time to go, mate.”

“What—wait a minute—Zahara, darling, should I—”

“Yea,” Iakov says, as if Gerald’s just asked him something. And then he lifts Gerald by his arms, like a mannequin, and takes him to the front door. He pulls it open and pushes Gerald through, his clothes still bundled in his arms.

“Don’t come back here. Next time I see you, I’m cutting your dick off.”

Gerald’s mouth opens in a squeal of terror, but Iakov’s already closed the front door. He pushes the locks shut with finality and turns back to me. He doesn’t say a word. He walks past me, back to the kitchen, back to his stool and his damned book and his black coffee.

I follow him. I feel hot all over with a confusing mixture of anger and annoyance and relief and about a dozen other things I wouldn’t admit under pain of death.

“You didn’t have to be so rude.”

“He’s gone. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“I didn’t want to kick him out half-naked onto my doorstep.”

Iakov raises an eyebrow. “Wanna invite him back in?”

“That’s not the point.”

“What’s the point, then?”

“That you can’t—that he was my guest, and that you could have a little more respect—not *every* guy I date has to be some pervert predatory creep, that—”

“Pervert predatory creep,” Iakov repeats with a curling of his lip that would be a smile if his eyes weren’t so dark and empty. “You said it, not me.”

I let out an angry laugh devoid of any actual amusement. “You think everyone who goes near me is a pervert, Iakov.” I cross my arms and narrow my eyes at him. “Jealousy is such an ugly colour on you.”

It’s his turn to laugh. “Why would I be jealous of a man who couldn’t even make you come?”

For a moment, I’m too floored to say anything. I blink at him, mouth fallen open. He doesn’t even look triumphant or mocking. He seems genuinely amused, as if my night with Gerald is a joke.

“I came,” I say finally, my chest rising as a flame of anger rushes inside me.

“Hah—no.”

Iakov drains his cup, takes his stupid book in one hand, and stops right in front of me on his way out. He catches my chin in his fingers, always so gentle for such a big, rough man. He smells like cigarettes and soap and coffee. He tilts my head back to look at him.

“No, Zahara. You faked.” His voice is low and bereft of any emotion. But his eyes, all that seething darkness, are like the two snakes in my dreams, the two snakes from his chest, wrapping themselves around me in an inescapable grip. “You should try fucking someone who knows the difference.”



THAT NIGHT, WHEN I get into bed after a hot bath, and I lie in the wavering light of a single candle, I don't even pretend I'm not thinking about Iakov when I slip my hands between my legs.

I do the opposite. I recite my litany of hatred in my head. All the things I hate about him, itemised. His dead black eyes, his sad mouth, his stupid buzz cut, all that wasted hair. His black leather jacket and cuffed combat boots, his deathtrap motorbike. His ridiculous height, his tattoos, his bruises and cuts, his knuckles.

Reminding myself of everything I hate about him is soothing, and it makes me feel better when the pulse between my legs quickens. I close my eyes, and I think about Iakov, rain dripping down the carved valley of his cheeks, over his jaw and down his tattooed neck. Iakov, in a dark room at my feet, taking off my shoes with his big fingers brushing over my leg.

I arch my back and trail my fingers over my stomach, muscles twitching under my fingertips. How would Iakov fuck me, if he allowed himself to? Would he be gentle, the way he is when he looks after me, or would he be rough, the way he is once the bloodlust sets in and he's more wolf than man?

My fingers trace the hollow of my ribcage, the swell of my breasts, the tips of my nipples. I imagine Iakov's big hands squeezing my breasts, tattooed knuckles whitening.

Would he kiss me before guiding himself into me, or would he thrust in all at once in a brutal invasion? My fingers glide back down to bury themselves between my clenched thighs. What would he rasp in my ear?

*Cruel mistress. Kolyuchka. Zahara.*

I don't know which one I would hate more. I don't know how it would feel to hear the low growl of his throat in my ear, the reverberation of it through his chest. I stroke myself faster. He's so big, his body would cover mine entirely. Would it hurt to have him inside me? Probably. But it might fill some of the emptiness within.

Would he tell me he loves me? Probably not. But he does—even if it's by proxy, even if it's just a ricochet of love.

I imagine the words in his voice.

*I love you, Zahara.*

I come in a rush, too quickly. A strangled sound almost like a sob breaks from my throat. I clamp my mouth shut and bury my face into my pillow as the shockwaves of my orgasm ripple through me.

I would rather let Iakov hear my fake moans every time I fuck someone else than let him hear what I sound like when I come thinking about him.



THE FOLLOWING WEEK, SINCE it's now the start of December, I have an afternoon tutorial with Professor Sterling. Normally, I would be excited, but ever since he came to my birthday party, I've been avoiding him. Not because anything happened—more because I didn't expect him to come, and I didn't want him to know about James, even if James is now nothing more than an unfortunate ex.

But I've delayed this meeting for almost two weeks, and the more I delay it, the more awkward it'll feel when I finally go. Besides, I've worked too hard on my dissertation to let it fall into neglect. Those sleepless nights were good for one thing at least.

I knock on his office door at exactly six in the evening—our scheduled slot. His voice is gentle when he calls out through his door, "Come in, Zahara."

His office is just like him. Polished, sophisticated, distinguished. His degrees and diplomas are displayed in glossy brown frames on the walls on the wall above his desk. His bookshelves are neat and meticulously organised. There are plants in terracotta pots lined on the low, broad windowsill next to the chairs where he holds small seminars with his post-



grad students, including some of my favourites. Staghorn ferns, Adanson's monstera and nerve plants.

"So... you had an interesting birthday party," Professor Sterling says in a light tone when I sit down on the other side of his desk.

I shift awkwardly in my seat, trying to think of something to say. That party was such a mess, and everything seems so different now.

Including the way I feel in Professor Sterling's presence. His eyes are still so warm, his smile so comforting. But when I look at him, I can't help but see an older man, a parental figure. A professor instead of a potential lover. Maybe that's a good thing, though. Maybe it's progress.

Maybe Iakov was right. Maybe my father's love doesn't matter as much as I thought it did. Maybe I can stop looking for it in guys like Professor Sterling.

He notices my awkwardness because he says, "Are you alright, Zahara?"

I nod and smooth my skirt over my legs.

"Your boyfriend seems like a nice guy," he continues, slowly and carefully, like he's picking his way through an emotional swamp.

My mind immediately goes to Iakov's big arms around me when he escorted me out of the party—the heat and heft of his body, like a living shield protecting me from the world. Iakov later that night, kneeling at my feet to take my shoes off or

sitting on my bed while I straddled him. Heat rises in my cheeks and I quickly shake my head.

“Oh no, he’s not my boyfriend.”

Professor Sterling raises his eyebrows. “Really? He was trying to make it pretty clear to myself and everyone he spoke to that you and he were in some form of relationship.” He glances down at his hand, picking at a nail. “Subtlety isn’t James Verma’s strong suit, I must admit.”

My heart sinks, and for a moment, I’m sunk so far into humiliation I can’t even catch my breath.

Professor Sterling wasn’t talking about Iakov. *Of course* he wasn’t. Why would he be? As if Iakov would ever hint, with or without subtlety, at a relationship with me. As if Iakov would even *think* to speak to Sterling.

I don’t know what’s more humiliating: thinking Sterling was talking about Iakov or the fact Sterling was actually talking about James. Or James telling Sterling about our relationship, in that awkward, presumptuous way of his. Or Sterling knowing about my disgusting relationship with James.

“Well, never mind that!” Professor Sterling says brightly. “Here. Since I didn’t get to give it to you at your party.”

He hands me a beautifully decorated box from behind the desk. I take it and pull open the white bow. Tucked inside is a note on a cream card that reads, “Happy birthday to my favourite young historian.” Inside the box, tucked away in a nest of crepe, is an alabaster bust of Venus, curls tied back.

Her lips are curled in a slight smile, the hollows carved inside her eyes fix me like pupils. I look up. Professor Sterling is smiling.

“Do you like it?”

“It’s beautiful.”

If any other man had given me a bust of Venus, I might have wondered if it was a love confession of some kind. But Professor Sterling looks so genuinely proud, and his love of myth and history is my favourite thing about him, and I can tell he’s just trying to cheer me up.

So I smile. “Thank you so much, professor. It’ll look perfect on my mantelpiece.”

Professor Sterling laughs. “Just make sure you don’t break yours like I broke mine last time I cleaned my office. I’m certain I’ve been cursed ever since.”

And just like that, all the awkwardness and embarrassment from earlier is gone.

Heartkicker

## Iakov

IN DECEMBER, ZACHARY COMES down from Oxford and we go out for a drink. He looks better than the last time I saw him, with his fresh haircut and his tailored suit. When I ask him how he's been, and he tells me about his studies and his life with Theodora, it's obvious that he's happy. The warmth of his happiness is almost enough to chase the cold out from my insides.

“How are you and Zaro getting on, then?” he says, resting his back against the leather of his seat.

We're in a quiet, rustic bar in Knightsbridge, not too far from the apartment building. Zahara's on a study date with Sanvi—I know because her social media right now is all pictures of caramel lattes, old books and stationery.

I take a swig of my drink and shrug. “She's not killed me yet.”

“*Yet,*” he repeats, raising an eyebrow.

“Either she kills me first or that fucking book does,” I tell him with a half-smile.

A spark of amusement flashes in his eyes. “Or she kills you *with* the book.”

“She definitely could. That book is heavy as shit and I've been teaching her some self-defence.”

Zach's eyebrows shoot up behind the gold rims of his glasses—a funny sight on his serene, scholarly face. “She agreed to it?”

“Maybe she's sick of being prey. Maybe she wants to be the hunter for once.”

I wish I hadn't said that because my mind flashes me images of Zahara in hunter mode. Zahara in ivory silk straddling my lap, or Zahara in a tight brown dress pressing her breasts to my chest. She's *definitely* capable of hunting. Just not the way I should be thinking of.

“Well, that sounds like excellent progress.” Zach lets out a short laugh that's more a sigh of relief than laughter. “You know, I've always wanted you two to get on. I feel like you would both be good for each other.”

My chest tightens at his words. I clear my throat and take another harsh sip of liquor. “What do we do if I don't catch the guy?”

He frowns. “What do you mean?”

“There's too many suspects. I've managed to get my hands on a ton of CCTV footage, but not found anything. If he doesn't try anything else, we might never find out who it is. Then what? Can't live with her forever.”

Zach gives me a half-hearted smile. “You sure you can't?”

“Definitely not.”

*Definitely not the way you're thinking anyway.*

He sighs and rests his chin on his interlaced fingers in a manner so familiar it sends a powerful wave of nostalgia through me.

“I hadn’t thought of that, Kav. Look, let me think on it. I’ve already spoken to the owner of her building about setting up some cameras in the lobby; that might be the best we can do. And it’s not like she’ll live there forever. And I suppose I’m not that far from London. And you’re right, it’s not fair to ask you to suspend your life just to look after my sister. I’m sorry, Kav.”

I can’t help a grimace. I don’t want him apologising to me. I’m the one who should be apologising. I shake my head.

“It’s not that. It’s just... she’s a young woman, she’s gonna want to live her own life. Not easy to do with a big lump like me around, y’know?”

Zachary laughs. “She likes having you around more than she lets on, I promise.”

*Oh, I know.*

Fuck me. I am headed straight to hell.



ZACHARY INVITES US TO come and stay with him and Theo over the Christmas holidays, but Zahara already has

exams until the last week of term and then a few parties she's planning to go to. And since I have no intention of leaving her alone in the flat, even if she now has a knife—or two—and some basic fighting skills, I decline his invitation.

“Next year, yea?”

“Yes. Theo would like that.” Zachary smiles warmly as we stand outside in the frosty December, string lights crossing the street overhead, his cab waiting for him a few feet away. “You know... I think I'm going to propose to her this summer.”

“I'm surprised you haven't already.”

“Couldn't propose to her during our undergrad years.” Zachary laughs. “She would have assumed it was some sort of trick to gain an advantage over her in our competition.”

“You two need to just fight like normal couples.”

“Don't think we'll ever be a normal couple,” he says.

He's right. Nothing normal about him and Theo. Their love is the kind of shit storybooks and poems and stars are made of. If I never find happiness, it won't be so bad knowing they've found theirs. I hug him hard and clap his back.

“If Evan's your best man I'll never forgive you.”

He laughs against my shoulder. “Come on now. Of course it's going to be you, Kav. You're not just my friend. You're my family.”





BUT I'M NOT.

Everything would be easier if I was. Being Zachary Blackwood's brother would be a greater honour than I could ever deserve.

The longer time I spend living under the same roof as his sister, the further I get from that sense of brotherhood. Being around her all the time is torture, a test of my willpower and my honour.

She knows it as well, and she's never more cruel to me than she is of late. Maybe it's the pent-up stress of her exams, or maybe it's the mounting tension of the twisted push and pull between us, but something needs to give. There's a high Zahara is chasing, and she's trying to get it however she can.

Sometimes, it's by coming into my room at night, when I'm tossing and turning on my bed. She'll slide in next to me, her body all soft curves and hot skin. She'll ask me to hold her, and if I give her my arm to rest her head on, she'll slide the length of her thigh against mine. And she'll fall asleep straight away, and I'll lie awake all night, my lungs full of her perfume, ignoring my desperately hard cock.

Sometimes, it'll be while I'm training her. She'll ask me to show her how to get out of a grab, and when I put my arms

around her, she'll arch into me and smile up at me through a stray curl, sweat beading on her skin.

Other times, it'll be small, sly things. Slowly licking her spoon when eating dessert, or leaving the bathroom door ajar while she takes a bubble bath, or asking me to get on my knees to roll down her stockings.

Always just enough to put the idea of fucking in the air between us, but never enough that she has anything to feel guilty about. A tightrope of seduction and self-control.

But that's the thing with walking a tightrope. You're always on the verge of falling.



THE CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS START slow and peaceful—a brief ceasefire. Zahara buys a tree, which she makes me carry home for her, and we decorate it together while period dramas play in the background. Rhiannon and Sanvi, both staying in London over the holidays, spend Christmas with us, and I smoke on the balcony while I watch all three of them exchange presents.

Rhiannon even tosses a package at me. Cigarette wedged between my teeth, I pull off the bow and tear open the sparkly wrapping paper to find a black hoodie. On the back, in small white letters, it reads 'DEAD. FUN.'

I give her a nod. “Nice.”

“It’s from Zaro and me,” Rhiannon says.

“No it’s not,” Zahara says quickly, throwing me a glare. I prop my cigarette on the balcony railing and pull the hoodie on. I smile at her; the glare vanishes soon after.

The ceasefire comes to a crashing and explosive end a few days after Christmas. Zahara’s been talking about this New Year’s Eve party she’s going to. Some massive Moët-soaked black-tie ball in the Ritz followed by a wild after-party at Saffron House, a club in Notting Hill. Everyone who’s anyone in London high society will be there, apparently. Zahara seems to swing wildly from being breathlessly excited about the party to morbidly dreading it.

Then, two nights before the party, I find Zahara pacing up and down her flat, nervously looking at her phone. I put down the coffees and pastries I went out to grab and frown at her.

“What’s up?”

She throws me a furtive look. “You don’t want to know, trust me.”

“Right.”

I don’t press her with more questions. I don’t need to. Two minutes later, she whips around to face me across the living room. Even in the soft lights from all her lamps and candles, there’s a hard edge to the shadows on her face.

“You’re not going to like it.”

I cross my arms. “Right?”

“Erik’s going to be there.”

“I can break his legs so he can’t go.”

She glares at me. “Don’t break his legs. We broke up a while ago, there’s no reason it shouldn’t be fine.”

“Right. You’re the one who seems stressed. Not me.”

“I’m stressed because I don’t want you to go to prison.”

“I won’t.”

“And I don’t want you to cause a scene in the Ritz. The Ritz, Fido!”

I shrug. “Won’t be a problem if he stays away from you.”

She draws closer to me. I’m leaning back against the kitchen island, and she crosses the open space between the living room and the kitchen. She comes to stand right in front of me, and she crosses her arms and glares at me.

“You don’t have to defend me against Erik. I can look after myself.”

“I’m not going to the Ritz to party. I’m going to keep you safe.”

“I can keep myself safe. And Erik’s not going to do anything.”

“Except hurt you.”

“He would never hit me.”

I narrow my eyes. She's being obtuse on purpose. She's much smarter than this.

"I didn't say hit," I say, low and clear. "I said hurt."

"What—" She lets out a derisive laugh. "Are you afraid he's going to—what was it again?—kick at my heart until it's a puddle of blood at his feet?"

My jaw clenches, and a familiar bloodlust sends a rush through me like a red tide.

"Mattner's a piece of shit. He doesn't deserve to be anywhere near you."

"No? Then who does?" She steps forward, until she's right in my face, her ferocious gaze turned up to mine. "James didn't deserve it and neither did Gerald! Erik is a creep. All these men need to stay far away from me." She laughs, harsh and angry. "You want to keep me safe, so you put me high up in a tower so nobody can get to me and you certainly won't come into the tower. You'd rather just breathe fire at anybody who'll try and in the meantime, I'm trapped in the tower. Alone! And I'm sick to death of being alone!"

I stare down at her. The hurt and anger inside her vibrates through her, echoed by the anger and frustration inside me.

"Don't throw your heart at someone who'll crush it just to avoid being alone."

"Then don't make me."

I narrow my eyes. "Don't put this on me, Zahara."

“It’s on you whether you want it or not. You’d rather let us both suffer than betray some stupid oath that exists only in your head. And then you dare judge me for trying to make myself feel better?” She steps back with a sneer. “Guess what, Iakov? If you didn’t want me to throw my heart away, then you should’ve taken it when I tried to give it to you.”

And then the final thread of willpower I have left snaps.

# Hundredth Problem

## **Iakov**

IT'S ALL TOO EASY, in the end, to grab Zahara Blackwood into my arms and crush her mouth under mine. It's all too easy to hitch her body up against mine with my hands on the curve of her ass, to let her wrap her thighs against me, and to let her bite into the meat of my bottom lip. It's all too easy to turn around, push everything off the kitchen island to prop her on it and let her arch into me when I slide my bloody tongue into her sugared mouth.

She reaches for my belt, but I push her hands away. Instead, I roll her jumper up over her head, breaking the kiss. She lets out a choked sigh when I grip her waist and pull her flush to me.

“Loving and fucking,” I whisper roughly into her ear, “are two very different things.”

She pushes me off her with her hand on my neck, fingernails digging in right where the thorns of her are already tattooed into my skin.

“Then give me both.”

“No, Kolyuchka.” I lower my head to her neck, lick her neck, press a wet, rough kiss between her collarbones, tongue her nipples through the thin lace of her bra. “Even a dog has its limits.”



I push her back onto the marble counter. She leans back on her elbow, arching her hips as I kiss my way down her stomach, to the waistline of her short skirt. I prop her thighs onto my shoulders and bite the insides of them, like the beast she thinks I am. She lets out a needy whimper that sends a rush of blood straight to my cock. Her fingers curl around the edge of the counter, and her hips move in a slow, writhing motion.

“Close your eyes,” I say against her skin. “Close your eyes. Let me give you what you need.”

Zahara’s body is pliant and sweet, offered up like a cake to a starving man. I push aside her panties with my thumb and press my mouth to her pussy. She’s radiating heat, so wet my tongue glides easily over her, my cheeks and chin soaked within seconds. I don’t care. The taste of her might be my new addiction.

My face between her thighs, I give in to the hunger and devour her with abandon. Her body trembles and twitches with each delving swipe of my tongue; the sound of her rasping whimpers makes my cock so hard I’m biting back groans of pain.

“Fuck,” I mutter against her. “You’re driving me fucking mad.”

“But it feels so good,” she breathes.

Oh, it fucking does. Who would have thought madness could taste so good?

And even though what I'm doing is wrong, it feels so fucking *right*, in the end, to give her what she needs.

Pleasure lives locked inside Zahara's body, a flower closed like a fist. It doesn't take much to tease it out. Just kisses, and little cruel bites along her inner thighs, and my tongue on her clit. And Zahara is so abandoned and vocal in her pleasure. She writhes and bucks and she moans and sighs. And then she grows still, her fingers clutching the edges of the marble counter, and she lets out a whisper like a confession.

"Oh god, I'm going to come."

"I know."

I bury myself between her legs, delve deep with my tongue, let her grind herself on my wet face, which should never be anything more than a tool for her pleasure.

She comes on my tongue with a husky cry, her eyes flying open. I look up to watch her, all that terrible beauty of her, falling open like a bloom. She's watching me too, her eyes on mine, her mouth wet and open. We stare at one another, my tongue still on her, my face a sodden mess. Her entire body shakes and she slumps back as if struck by sudden exhaustion.

I lay her legs down and straighten myself, looking down at her. A sight no mortal man could resist. Zahara Blackwood with her skirt pushed around her waist and her breasts rising and falling as she pants and her wet pussy gleaming in the gold light. Fuck. It's a sight that's going to haunt me till the day I die.

Later, when I've run her a bubble bath, I pick her up and carry her into the bathroom. She wraps her arms around my neck and smirks at me. A delicious smirk, full of satisfaction and smugness and that innate Blackwood arrogance.

“That wasn't so hard, now, was it?”

*My cock begs to differ, I think.*

*And, I've betrayed my friend for you.*

*And, No, it wasn't hard at all, Zahara, to please you. It's all I've ever wanted to do.*



THE NIGHT OF THAT cursed party, I leave the apartment with a knot of dread in my throat. Something's going to go wrong. I can't tell how I know, but I do. Maybe it's just paranoia, mixed with my hatred of Mattner. Let's hope it's just that.

Zahara left less than an hour ago, picked up by a limo Sanvi's father sent. She told me she'd be on the red carpet for about an hour and to meet her inside the Ritz around nine in the evening.

Except that when I get to my bike, I'm stopped in my tracks.

The knot of dread in my throat tightens. For a second, I can't even breathe.

My bike lies on the side of the road. Pieces of it, glistening black, lie scattered across the pavement. It's been crushed beyond saving, smashed to pieces, irreparably destroyed.

A concerned Knightsbridge citizen must have already called the police. There are two cars parked near the wreckage of my bike, red and blue lights flashing, and a few officers spread up and down the streets, talking to passers-by and residents.

Fuck.

I shove my hands in my pockets, turn around, and set off in the opposite direction. No point talking to the police. My bike is registered to a fake name and address, and I already know who destroyed it.

Anton tried to warn me. Ignoring him was never going to get rid of the problem.

And now, it looks like the problem is in London, and it's found where I'm staying, and it's sending me a warning.

My bike's always been an extension of me. If my father had it destroyed, it's not to be wasteful or petty.

It's to say, *You're next, mutt.*



LONDON ISN'T THE HARDEST place to get around on foot, but it still takes me almost an hour to get to the Ritz. I get

stopped by security at first, but true to her words, Zahara had my name put on the list. The security guard looks me up and down and grunts, “This is a black-tie event.”

I glance down at myself. I’m in the usual, black jeans, black hoodie, leather jacket and boots. My clothes are the last thing on my mind at any given moment, but now more than ever. I shrug.

“I’m staff, not a guest.”

He frowns. “You’re on the guest list.”

“I’m security detail for Zahara Blackwood. Call her dad the duke and ask, if you like.”

He sighs and rolls his eyes. “I suppose you’re on the list.”

I give him a curt nod and don’t wait for him to say anything; I barge past him and the glass doorways he’s guarding. Inside, I stop to get my bearings. Stepping inside the Ritz during New Year’s Eve feels like I’ve just travelled through time. The decor is extravagant—chandeliers, pillars, white marble, gold gilding, enormous Christmas garlands and trees glowing with a thousand lights. *Sev would love this shit*, I think distractedly.

But the place isn’t just grand, it’s huge too, and teeming with the rich and famous. Dinner service seems to have just finished, and everyone seems to be moving into a sort of big, open ballroom that looks straight out of Zahara’s movies.

How the fuck am I going to find her in all of this?

By not stopping until I do.



I'M MAKING MY WAY through the dance floor, shamelessly barging into tipsy dancers, when a head pops around my shoulder. I turn sharply and immediately relax when I see a familiar face, kind eyes and silky black hair parted around a delicate chain of gold and rubies.

“Sanvi.”

“Iakov, I thought it was you.” She smiles, but the worry in her voice is obvious. It makes red alarms blare inside my skull. “Are you here for Zaro?”

“Where is she?”

“Um, she went out into the garden for some fresh air.” She swallows and then shakes her head. “With that vile ex of hers.”

My chest tightens. My fists clench in my pockets. “Which one?” I ask, even though I already know.

“Erik,” Sanvi says. Her grimace tells me she likes the techno-bro about as much as I do.

“Alright. I’ll go check on her.” I pull my hand out of my pocket to give her a reassuring pat. “Don’t worry.” And before I walk away, I ask, “Are you gonna be alright?”

She nods. “Yes, I’m here with my sisters and parents. We can give you guys a lift home later if you like.”

“No, it’s alright. Can you call us a cab though?”

“Of course.”

I give her a thumbs-up and head outside into the fancy gardens. There are strings of lights crossing overhead, and instead of tables and dining chairs, there are little lounge chairs under heat lamps. Guests sit or stand in small groups, smoking and vaping. I walk past them, searching for Zahara’s face. The garden is surrounded by trees, and even though there are little paper lights overhead, it’s much darker under the trees’ shadows.

“If you hadn’t left that night, then I wouldn’t have broken up with you.”

I hear Erik Mattner’s voice, that self-satisfied muffled drawl, before I see him.

“You didn’t break up with me, I broke up with you.”

Zahara’s voice, in contrast, is loud and hoarse and raw with emotion. I draw closer. They are standing amongst the trees. Zahara looks like a mermaid in a long dress fringed all over with crystals, but she’s hugging herself against the cold wind, and her shoulders are squared and tense. Mattner is smoking a cigarette and his back is to me, so I can’t see his expression, but his body language is lazy and comfortable. He’s wearing a tux that probably cost more than my bike, a poncy silk scarf around his neck.

Just the sight of him is enough to set my blood raging with violence and fury. But seeing him in a jacket while Zahara hugs her bare arms against the cold makes me want to rip his head off his neck.

“You would never break up with me,” Mattner is saying. “You were always so desperate for my attention. But I don’t care what you tell all your little friends. Everyone knows the truth.”

“The truth isn’t whatever you say it is,” Zahara says.

I’ve never seen her like this. All the flame and ferocity that is Zahara seems to have burned away, leaving behind a little pile of smouldering ashes. Her entire body curls in on itself, like a small animal cringing to protect itself. And Mattner, big and blond and wearing his nice warm tuxedo jacket, is looking down on her like she’s prey.

“The truth is that you’re in love with me and will always be in love with me. And all those stupid pathetic things you’re doing, telling everyone you broke up with me, dating those losers—just cries for attention.” He crushes his cigarette butt into an ashtray and steps closer to Zahara, taking her by her arms. “But you know better than to play these games with me, Zee. You and I, we’re the real deal. Our relationship wasn’t the fairy tale, and I’m no knight in shining armour. But what we had was raw, *real*.”

“What relationship?” Zahara says, trying to pull away. “You can’t be in a relationship with someone while sleeping around whenever you like.”



I step forward through the trees, still veiled by shadows. Every instinct is screaming at me to wrench Mattner off Zahara, to rip into him like a piece of paper. But I hold back.

Zahara wouldn't want me to hear all this, but I can't leave her alone. Zahara wouldn't want me to take control of the situation, she wouldn't want me to intervene. But if I walk away, I'm leaving her alone with this piece of shit, and I couldn't forgive myself. I hesitate, torn between instinct and reason.

"Monogamous relationships are against human nature," Mattner reels off like he's reciting lines from a script he knows by heart. "We're better than this, Zee, *you*'re better than this. You're so mature for your age, I thought you would understand." He rubs his hands up and down her arms, ignoring her attempts to pull away. "I know you loved the excitement, the thrill of what we had. I know you miss it." He pulls her towards him, but she resists. "I know you miss *me*."

"I miss you like a hole in the head," she grits out. "Let me go, Erik. I don't even know why I listened to all this. I don't know why I thought you would apologise. You haven't changed one bit, you're just the same shit-talking, shallow loser you always were."

*Good. Now dash your open palm into his face, Kolyuchka.*

"You know you don't think that," Mattner says. His hands tighten around her arms. His knuckles are white under the orange light of the heater. "You didn't come out here for an apology, Zee." He jerks forward to kiss her; she jerks back. He

yanks her back to him by her arm. “Stop playing hard to get, sweetheart. We both know you’re going to end up on your knees with my cock down your throat.”

And then everything in my head goes

blank and

loud and

*red.*

Wolfkisser

## Zahara

THE WORDS HAVE BARELY left Erik's mouth when three things happen in very quick succession.

The first is my hand flying into Erik's face in a resounding slap.

The second is Erik's painful grip coming loose in his surprise.

The third is a black shadow flashing across my vision and ramming into Erik with the force of a cannonball crashing into the side of a ship.

Erik goes flying through the trees in an explosion of movement. I step back, stifling a scream under my hands. I'm tipsy enough that everything is happening uncontrollably fast and in slow motion at the same time.

Iakov Kavinski has appeared out of nowhere like he materialised from the shadows themselves. He's pinning Erik to the floor with his knee shoved into Erik's gut. Erik's arms are crooked up in front of his face, trying to protect it from the blows raining thickly down on him.

But Iakov is relentless and his punches fall hard and thick. His face is pale and blank, his eyes are two black slits. He hits Erik until Erik's arms fall away from his face, and then he hits Erik until his punches become wet and slimy with blood. The

sound is a stomach-churning squelch, like he's punching twigs through mud.

Then Iakov jumps to his feet, incredibly deft for someone his size. He drags Erik up with him and props him upright against a tree. Erik dangles from Iakov's fist like a rag doll. He coughs and spits out a mouthful of blood and teeth.

And then Iakov turns his head, and he speaks so calmly it sends a shiver through me.

"Zahara. Do you want me to kill him?"

My name in his mouth sends a terrible spike of some unknown emotion through my chest. Because he's here, with me, *for* me, and I no longer have to be afraid. He's *here*.

I shake my head quickly. "No, no. I don't want you going to prison because of him—"

"I won't go to prison," Iakov says. "If I kill him, he won't ever be found." Erik lets out a soggy squeal of fear. Iakov ignores him, keeping his eyes on me. "Do you want him dead?" he asks again, as if he's asking me if I want cream in my tea.

"No," I say. "No. I just... I just need him to stay away from me."

Erik nods, looking at me desperately through the swollen red bags of flesh around his eyes. He says something I can't even understand. Iakov turns back to him.

"If you ever go near her again, I'll kill you with these two hands." His voice is hard and bleak. "I'll kill you myself, and I

won't make it nice or clean. I'll make it a dirty death, a vermin's death. It's what you deserve, you cunt. When you crawl home and get on your knees to thank god for being alive, it's Zahara Blackwood you should thank." Iakov throws Erik to the ground, and without any expression whatsoever, he shoves his boot into Erik's face. Erik lets out a yell of pain like the shriek of a dying animal. "Thank her *twice*," Iakov continues coolly. "Because tonight is the second time she saved your life. The next time I see you, nobody will save you. Not even her."

And then he kicks Erik's head so hard he goes completely still. Iakov turns slowly towards me. He doesn't say a word. He looks me up and down, and I shiver under the darkness of his gaze.

With a little carefree shrug, he takes off his black leather jacket and wraps it gently around my shoulders. It's warm from his body, an indirect hug.

"You looked cold," he says, matter-of-fact.

I nod. I was.

"Do you want to go home?" he asks, lowering his voice, speaking with infinite gentleness and patience.

I nod again.

"Yes, please," I say, and my voice breaks.



ONCE AGAIN, IAKOV KAVINSKI carries me home in his arms like I'm a cartoon princess.

I'm still wearing his jacket and he's carrying my vintage crystal clutch wedged under his arm like it's the most natural thing in the world. His body is a furnace, pouring forth heat, and I can't get enough of it. I secretly pray he keeps me in his arms, but he carries me into my bedroom and sets me gently down on my bed.

"How much did you hear?" I ask him as he steps back. My throat is thick with sobs that feel like they've been building up and waiting there for *years*. "Before you hit Erik. How much did you hear?"

"Just the scummy bits," he says, kneeling at the side of my bed.

Even though I've not asked him to, he's well-trained by now. He gently takes my leg in his hand and unlaces one shoe. The memory of the last time he rescued me from Erik, that time when he took me to the hotel room and set me on the bed and took my shoes off, flashes in my mind. The memory and the present merge together confusingly. I shake my head.

"The whole conversation was scummy," I whisper. "He's scummy. And I'm scummy for ever being with him at all."

“You’re not scummy,” Iakov says.

He sets my shoe aside and unlaces the other. His fingers move over the bare skin of my legs, sending ripples of shiver through me. Why can’t every man be as gentle as he is with me?

“You don’t have to lie to me,” I tell him, fisting my hand on his shoulder, the fabric of his black hoodie scrunching in my hand. “I know I’m disgusting. I’m disgusting for sleeping with all these disgusting men. Or I sleep with all these disgusting men because I’m disgusting. I don’t know anymore.”

He looks up at me. He’s finished taking my shoes off, but he stays on his knees. The room is dark, but his eyes are darker still.

“I *never* lie to you,” he says. “Never have, never will.”

I let out a sigh so deep my entire body falls forward with it. I bend down over Iakov, resting my forehead against his, suddenly exhausted.

“I know,” I say.

“You’re not disgusting,” he says. “Not even a little bit.”

I swallow around the lump in my throat, but there’s nothing I can do to stop the tears that slip down my cheeks.

“Then why did you reject me?” I say, low and *so* pathetic. “All those years ago. That first time I kissed you?”

“Because you were drunk and vulnerable and sad,” Iakov says. “I’m not a guy who takes advantage of drunk,



vulnerable, sad girls.”

I stare at him. I hate the dark fuzz of his buzz cut and the narrow slits of his eyes and the pale emotional planes of his face and the perfect bow of his full lips and the tiny flecks of blood splattering his chin and mouth.

“But you think I’m beautiful.”

“Yes,” he says. “I’m not blind or dead—of course you’re beautiful. You’re so beautiful it hurts to look at you. But I don’t love you because you’re beautiful. I love you because you’re thorny, smart, strong. I love all those things. I wish you loved those things too.”

I swallow. The tears are now flowing freely down my cheeks. A cloud of sadness inside me seems to have exploded, and even though I’m crying, I also feel a strange sense of relief.

Maybe it’s the alcohol or the adrenaline, and maybe it’s just the pure euphoria of letting go of the sadness I held in for so long.

I cup Iakov’s cheeks in my hands. He’s still on his knees in front of me. I tilt his head back, forcing him to look at me, and I say, “I’m *not* your sister.”

He hesitates for a second. “I know.”

“Zachary doesn’t own me. Nobody does. *I* decide what I want.”

He tilts his head ever so slightly to the side. His black eyes are chips of obsidian in his pale face. His voice is just as dark

when he says, “You hate me, remember?”

*No, I don't.*

“I remember.”

And then our lips touch, and I have no idea whether it was him who kissed me or me who kissed him, and it doesn't matter anyhow because I'm kissing Iakov Kavinski, a real kiss, and for such a rough, broken man, his mouth is warm and soft as sunlight.

Gold & Black

## **Iakov**

ZAHARA BLACKWOOD KISSES ME, and everything is gold.

Inside me, it's only ever black or red. Black like the lake in Yalinka, black like the death waiting inside me, or red like my father's knuckles the day he came to pluck me out of my life, red like the bloodlust in my veins. Black guilt, red fear. Black despair, red desire.

But Zahara is gold. A jewel of a woman, precious like nothing else. I've been so afraid that touching her would taint her, that the gold of her would turn dull and black where I held her. I was wrong.

She's the one transforming me, turning me gold in all the places she touches me.

Last time I kissed her, last time I touched her—it was so desperate and raw and painful.

This is nothing like it.

This kiss is slow motion and soft-focus. It's a kiss of attrition, a kiss like an apology, like a forgiven sin. Her lips move against mine like the glide of satin. My jaw aches, my mouth falls open in an indistinct sound. *Zahara*, I say silently into her mouth, pressing her name from my tongue onto hers.

"Iakov," she says.

Iakov. My name. Not a dog name or an insult. Not Kav or Knuckles or patsan or mutt. My name, which sometimes sounds as foreign to my ears as a stranger's name.

She pulls away slowly and I follow, drawn by the gravity of hers. The black hole at the heart of my life that's forever pulling me in. My whole life, I've been waiting for my own destruction.

I would rather it be brought by her than anybody else.

Destruction tastes like her mouth, like alcohol and cake and caramel lip gloss. It tastes like the tears that have dried on her lips and the hot metal tang of despair and hunger.

Our mouths part long enough for Zahara to pull on the hem of my hoodie. I let her roll it up my body, over my head and arms. She throws it aside without a care, to land amongst her plants and books. She takes off my shirt next, and she runs her hands across my chest. The gesture is hesitant and inquisitive.

"Why the serpents?" she asks, her voice a curl of smoke.

"Because of my fathers."

"Fathers?"

"The shit one and the not-so-shit one."

Her fingers move from the snakes to the black hole on my arm. "And this?"

"My first scar. A cigarette burn."

"Your father?"

"No. Some kid from my school."

“Spearcrest?”

“Before that. Spearcrest is this one.” I point to the small tattoo on the side of my chest. A spear through five crowns.

“And this?” Her fingers glide over my skin. They gently brush the only coloured tattoo I have. A sunflower, bright yellow petals.

“Yelena. My little sister.”

She swallows. “I never knew you had a sister.”

“You never asked.”

There’s a flash of sadness on her face. She whispers, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” I kiss her apologies away. And then I kiss her harder, deeper. Trying to taste the sadness inside her, wondering if it tastes different to mine.

She pushes me away in a wet gasp. Her fingers dig into my shoulders. She glances down at my chest and swallows in a shiver. “And the thorns?” she asks breathlessly.

I laugh, a rough, scratchy sound. “You, Zahara. All you. Every last thorn.”

“Because I’ve hurt you so much?” Her voice breaks.

“Because I can’t get you out of my skin.”

This time, she’s the one who kisses me. She drags me down to her, one hand wrapped around my neck. I follow her obediently—don’t I always? Am I not devoted to her, abjectly obedient, her dog to command and mistreat and reward as she pleases?

Her other hand reaches for my trousers, pulls at the button, tugs on the zip. She's impatient, now, that edge of desperation inside her cutting us both open.

“Now,” she commands against my mouth. “*Now.*”

And fuck do I want her. Obeying her has never been difficult, but obeying her now is a desperate urge, a need I can no longer deny.

I pull my trousers down without breaking the kiss. When I try to guide myself inside her, she pushes my hand away roughly. She strokes me with her fingers, and I bite down on a groan of pleasure, wrenching my mouth away from hers. She arches against me, placing the head of my cock against her entrance. I stare down at her. She stares back, her gaze bold and hungry and full of authority.

I know she's wanted this—but she has no idea how much *I've* craved it.

All those agonising nights, all those cold showers. A hunger never fed, now devouring me.

“Now,” she says again, low and rough. “*Please.*”

*Yes, cruel mistress, golden rose.*

I thrust inside her, burying myself to the hilt. A growl of satisfaction rumbles through my chest, an animal sound. My entire body shakes with how good it feels to be inside her, the heat and wetness and tightness of her driving the sanity right out of me.

Part of me wants to pin her down, fuck her rough and hard and quick. Fuck myself deep into the tight heat of her, hunt my climax like an animal. Another part of me wants to savour the moment, to inflict on her a glimpse of the torment she's inflicted on me all these months. To fuck her slow, like a delicious torture, to dangle her orgasm in front of her and make her beg for it.

All of me just wants one thing, though. To surrender myself to Zahara Blackwood, to become a slave to her pleasure.

And so I pull out of her and thrust in, slow, but hard. I let her adjust to the size of me, I let her squirm and whimper and dig her fingernails into my hips. At first, she tries to control my speed, and I let her. I won't rush this just because I've wanted it for so long.

She looks up at me, a wicked, hungry glint in her eyes. "More."

"Are you sure?"

Her lips curl in a cocky smirk. "I can take it."

So I give her more. I take her wrists in my hands and I pin them above her head and I fuck her slow and hard, slamming my hips into hers. All that boldness and hunger and authority melts right out of her eyes. Her eyes roll into her head, her eyelids flutter shut. Her trembling legs wrap themselves around my hips. Her voice becomes an incoherent cry.

I stop with the tip of my cock at her entrance and look down at her. "Too much?"



Fire flares in her eyes.

“Never,” she says, even though I know how large I am, even though I can feel her body tense against mine. “Harder. More. *Please.*”

“Don’t want to hurt you,” I breathe into her ear.

“Hurt me,” she says in a gasp that’s half a sob, half a moan. “Hurt me. I want you to. I deserve it.”

“No.” I lower myself onto my elbows, taking her head in my hands. She arches underneath me, closing the space between us. Her hard nipples brush against my chest, both slick with sweat now. I dig my fingers into her hair, but I don’t grip, and I don’t pull. I hold her, forcing her to look at me. “You don’t deserve to be hurt. You don’t deserve it at all.”

She tries to shake her head, but I don’t let her.

“You don’t deserve to be hurt, Zahara. You deserve to feel *good.*” I drag myself slowly out, almost pulling out but not quite. “You deserve *pleasure*”—I thrust myself back in, not hard, but slow and deep, grinding my hips into hers, rocking myself against her clit—“and *love.*”

“N—no, no,” she says, the smoke of her voice scattering, fading, blown away in the strength of her emotion. “No.”

“Yes.”

And I fuck her just like that, the way she deserves. I fuck her like I love her, not just because I do, but because she needs it. Deserves it. I fuck her slow and deep and tender until her breaths become moans and her fingers become claws. I let her

pull and push and rip at me. I let her cut ribbons into my back because unlike her, I *do* deserve to be hurt.

And the more she hurts me, the more tenderness I give her. I kiss her mouth long and slow. I glide my lips against the column of her neck, tasting her sweat, her pulse. I lick the delicate shell of her ear, and I suck the hard points of her nipples until her stomach is a tide of rippling muscles and her thighs begin to shudder uncontrollably around my hips.

Then I give her more. I turn her over onto her stomach, tilting her hips up, kissing the lush curve of her arse and then biting it. She squirms and cries out, and I grab her hips in my hands and bury myself inside her. I give her the full length of my cock, all the way in, so deep I can feel her entire body shaking. I fuck her with the abandon of a beast, I fuck her like she's mine and I'm hers. Her back glimmers with sweat, golden curls coiling against her skin like ornaments.

Finally, a broken wail drips from her lips. She looks at me over her shoulder and says in a rasp, "I hate you. I hate you. You make me feel complete."

I slam into her and lean forward, to kiss her shoulder, to bite it.

"You make me come apart," I answer against her ear. My voice comes out just as low and broken as hers. "I love you. I love you."

When she comes, her entire body tenses and arches, like a shock of electricity has just ripped her apart. Her fingers claw at the bed, her mouth opens wide in a ragged scream.

Watching her come is like a punch straight to the gut, like a knife thrust into the centre of my heart.

Watching her come is what makes me lose all my control, in the end. I fuck her hard and fast, pinning her hips into place with my hands. My orgasm hits me like a sledgehammer. My jaws clamp down on a cry, crushing it into a groan. A noise like pain. I come inside Zahara because now that I've lost my self-control, I can't seem to get it back. I come inside the lush wetness of hers, and it feels so fucking good my stomach muscles clench like a cramp.

Panting and shaking, I try to pull away before I can collapse on top of her. But Zahara's arms shoot up, grabbing my arms.

“Don't move.” This time, she doesn't speak in a command, but in a plea. “Stay like this, Iakov. Please.”

I lower myself on top of her, gathering her in my arms, trying not to crush her under my weight. We lie tangled together, my cock still inside her, sharing a panting breath, sharing a heartbeat.

And then, in the tiniest voice, with her lips pressed against my skin, Zahara mumbles, “I don't know that I hate you as much as I do. I think maybe I don't hate you at all.”



I WAKE UP LATE in the morning. My entire body is heavy and slow with sleep. Outside, the sky is dark and the air is still. No rain, no storm, no wind. I turn in the bed, blinking the darkness of sleep from my vision. I don't even remember the last time I slept this long in one stretch.

Zahara is still curled into my side, her blankets tangled around her thighs. The muted silver of the morning light outlines her body, giving it a halo like a fallen angel. My cock stirs at the sight of her hair spread over her silk pillow, her breasts pressed together, the inward curve of her waist, the fleshy roundness of her arms and hips and thighs. I ignore the rush of arousal and climb carefully out of bed.

Grabbing a hoodie and sweatpants from my room, I dress quickly. I shove a hat down over my ears, get my key and my wallet, and quietly leave the flat. After the night she's had, Zahara deserves to wake up to coffee and fresh pastries, and there's a bakery she likes just down the road. I have no idea whether it's open or not, but I'm not coming home empty-handed.

Except I don't even make it to the end of the road.

I barely make it down the building steps. A shadow appears from the corner of my eye, but I'm still sluggish from sleep. I barely have time to throw up an arm to cushion the blow that crashes into the side of my face.

I stumble, disoriented. The second blow comes, right to the back of my head, and this time, I crumple to the ground.

Everything goes black—black as the lake in Yalinka.

# BOOK FOUR



*Carl Knight  
&  
the Angel  
of Death*



In Trouble

## Zahara

TWO REALISATIONS CRASH DOWN on me the second I wake up. The first is that I'm naked as the day I was born and still sore from having sex with Iakov Kavinski, my sworn enemy and my brother's best friend.

The second is that he's gone.

I don't know how I can tell. The bed is empty, but Iakov isn't just gone from the bed. The intensity of his presence doesn't radiate through the silent apartment. He's gone.

I stretch and yawn. For the first time in my life, I have the complete certainty that I've not been abandoned. Iakov wouldn't betray me if you put a gun to his head. Knowing him, he's probably gone to get me something sweet to eat and strong to drink. That's just the kind of chivalry Iakov is capable of when he's not crushing someone's face under his boot.

Rolling across the bed, I reach for my phone. The battery is almost dead, and I have so many notifications crowding my screen it hurts to look at them. The time says twenty past eleven. I rarely sleep this late, even when I've been partying. But what I did last night was far from anything I've ever done before.

Sex with Iakov might have been the best sex of my life, but it's left me feeling like I've been mauled by a bear. I limp into



the bathroom and turn on the shower, running the water as hot as my skin can handle. For once, I don't feel disgusting. I'm tired and sore, but the soreness is strangely pleasant. A reminder of how it felt to have Iakov inside me, to be filled by him, stretched to my limit, like there was no space inside me for anything but him.

I close my eyes, letting the hot water wash over me. I want to do it again. I want to be in his arms, his mouth on my neck and his big hands pinning my hips while he fucks me deep and slow. I want it rather badly—I can't imagine ever *not* wanting it.

The thought is both satisfying and concerning. I'm not in love with Iakov, and I'm not naive about the nature of his love for me. Iakov loves me because I'm Zach's sister, he cherishes me by proxy because he cherishes my brother. That's all.

I need to clear my head. Probably we need to talk, a real adult conversation. Without alcohol involved or him rescuing me from something. Without dog names or insults or the unbearable tension between us. Maybe it'll be easier, now we've had sex. Now the curiosity and want and hunger has been satisfied. Maybe now, for the first time, we'll be able to sit across from each other and have a plain, normal, honest conversation.

After my hot shower, I get dressed. I try to tidy up. I pick up Iakov's jacket off the foot of my bed. Raising it to my face, I take a deep breath. The black, worn fabric smells just like him. Like sweat and cigarettes and his cheap cologne.

I slide into the jacket, wrapping it tightly around myself. Later, absently, I put my hands in the pocket and my fingers brush against paper. I pull it out and stare at it for a long moment, not understanding what I'm seeing.

A crumpled-up letter. A bill, by the looks of it, with a red *Final Notice* stamp.

It's addressed to a name I've never heard before.

*Willow Lynch.*



IAKOV DOESN'T COME BACK that day. I start to worry around nightfall, and I start to panic an hour later when I try to call him and find his vibrating phone on the table by the front door.

A few notifications float on the locked screen. A couple of texts from Séverin Montcroix, a lot of texts from someone named Anton, and seventeen missed calls—including mine, probably. I can't see who's tried to call him.

Iakov isn't good at responding to texts and phone calls. Zachary complains about it all the time, both back when they attended Spearcrest and more so once they left. But if he intended to go anywhere further than the end of the street, he would have taken his phone with him. His phone—and his

motorbike. But I find both the key and his helmet on the corner of the chest of drawers in his room.

“Shit,” I mutter to myself.

Something’s wrong. A feeling of dread lowers itself onto my chest. A boulder settling down. Something’s wrong. Iakov wouldn’t just vanish. Out of everything in this world, the one thing I can always trust for sure is that if I call, Iakov will come.

But I *can’t* call him.

I open my phone and stop on Zach’s number. I hesitate, biting into the fleshy lining inside my mouth until I taste blood. If I tell Zach, he’ll worry. His mind will flash back to that time in Spearcrest when Theo disappeared, when her father took her away. His terror and heartbreak then is something I never want to see again.

And even if he doesn’t drop into a panic attack, Zach will leave Oxford immediately, and come here either to be as helpless and afraid as I am, or Iakov will turn up and I’ll have called him for nothing. I debate telling Theo, but telling Theo is the same thing as telling Zach, only with an extra step.

*Wait until tomorrow, I tell myself. He’ll be back tomorrow. If not, then I’ll call Zach. Iakov will come back.*

*He always does.*



THAT NIGHT, I CAN'T sleep at all, not even a little bit. With a cup of chamomile in hand, I tiptoe into Iakov's room and climb into his bed. I drink my cup of tea, and since I'm still too cold, I grab Iakov's jacket from the foot of the bed and wrap myself in it. I curl up in the bed, pushing my face into the pillows. They smell like Iakov. It's almost comforting enough to stop the uncontrollable hammering of my heartbeat.

I fall asleep not long after daylight begins to lighten the sky. My sleep is itchy and restless and raw. When I wake up, a little after noon, I feel as if I barely slept. I check my phone, and then Iakov's. Mine is crawling with notifications, New Year wishes and social media updates and flurries of texts from Rhiannon and Sanvi, from my Spearcrest friends and the London lot. I don't have it in my heart to text any of them back.

Iakov's phone, now on less than five percent battery, has no new notifications. Just the same texts and missed calls as last night. Whoever was trying to get in touch with him must have given up.

Either that, or they found him.



ON MONDAY MORNING, I skip my university tutorial, and out of desperation, follow the only clue I have. The *Final Notice* letter. It can't have been there by coincidence. Iakov wears this jacket everywhere—if the letter was in his pocket, he put it there. The question is who on earth is Willow Lynch?

I take a private cab to the address, and it stops outside an ugly apartment building on the outskirts of London. The walls of the building are covered with graffiti, and the bike shed's plastic walls are melted black and deformed by fire.

I hesitate before opening the cab door, and the driver says, “Shall I wait for you, miss?”

“Yes, please, if you don't mind.”

I step out. A group of teenage boys in puffer coats linger to the side, some sitting on the stone wall lining the path up the building. Two of them share a cigarette, the others are bent over a phone, watching something. They glance at me but say nothing, and I hurry past them to the door.

The clouds above us swell almost black, threatening imminent rain. I wouldn't have come here unless I was desperate, and it's desperation that pushes me past the front door of the building. Although there's an intercom system next

to it, the door is old and broken. I make my way up to the address on the letter without any trouble.

Outside the door, I stop. I force myself to take a deep breath. What if I knock and Iakov answers the door? Could I even be angry at this point? I feel as if the relief of knowing he's okay would destroy any anger or resentment that might follow it.

I knock.

If Iakov opens the door, with his arms full of girls and no clothes on, I'm going to kill him. I'll kill him with the very same knife he gave me; I'll plunge my thorn in his heart. I'll kill him—but at least I'll know he's okay.

The door opens sharply. A girl stands in a doorway. No, not a girl.

A woman. She's small and slim, with big dark eyes that make her look young at first sight. But there are faint lines around her eyes like she frowns too much, and a little scar dipping into her top lip.

She's tense as anything, an animal poised to attack—or poised to escape. There's something about her that makes me take a step back. An invisible edge more pointed and deadly than the edge of the knife in my coat pocket.

“Who are you?” she asks.

Her accent is neutral—carefully put on to give nothing away. She's wearing a faded black T-shirt and ripped black jeans. Her mascara is smeared around her eyes. A tiny black notebook peeps out from the corner of one pocket.

This isn't a woman from my world. It's not even a woman from Rhiannon's world. This is a woman from a different world entirely. Her black nail polish is chipped, her short black hair is shaggy like she needs a haircut. Half of it is scraped back and tied with a plain black elastic band. The portion of her arm I can see is striped with lines of silver scars.

"I'm—I'm sorry for bothering you," I tell her. "I'm looking for someone."

She doesn't move an inch, standing half behind the door. Her eyes sweep me with a searching look that's quick and clinical, a visual pat down so direct it's almost a physical touch.

"You've come to the wrong place."

"Iakov," I blurt out. "Iakov Kavinski. Have you seen him?"

She frowns. "Who?"

I swallow. I feel like crying all of a sudden. I shake my head. "Never mind. I'm sorry for bothering you."

She stops me before I can turn away. "*Are you in trouble?*"

She speaks the question like I've never heard anyone speak. She asks it like the sharpening of a knife. Quick and cutting and insistent. Her voice demands the truth.

"No. I—I think *he* might be."

And then, finally, she moves. She raises her body all the way up, straightening herself in a feline gesture, and throws her head back in a hard, callous laugh.

“If he’s a man, he’ll be fine. The world was built for those fuckers—they know how to survive it. Trust me.” She grins at me. Her teeth are white and pointed, one front tooth slightly overlapping the other. Her grin spells danger in crimson letters and white bone. “Now run along, pretty thing. You don’t belong here.”

I do exactly what she says.



IT’S RAINING BY THE time the cab stops outside the apartment building. I thank the driver and make my way up to my apartment, a growing cloud of tears building inside my chest. What am I going to do? What the fuck am I going to do? If anything happens to Iakov, I don’t know how I—

I freeze in my steps on the corridor landing outside my apartment. The door is half-open. I wrap my fingers around the knife in my pocket and I push past the door. The sound of heavy footsteps leads me into the kitchen.

And there, standing like a black shadow, is Iakov Kavinski. He smiles through a mask of contusions, and he holds up the cup of coffee and white paper bag he’s holding.

“Hey, Zahara. Is it too late for breakfast?”



# Rough Nights

## Iakov

I BLACK OUT OUTSIDE of Zahara's flat in Knightsbridge, and I wake up somewhere dark and wet. High above me, fluorescent tubes flicker frantically like an asthmatic heartbeat. If this was a video game, this would be the area where the character is gonna die a lot.

Luckily for me, this is real life, and I only have to die once.

I try to roll upright, and a boot comes flying at my face. It misses my nose by an inch and crunches into my cheek instead. It hurts like a bitch, but I already know the pain is going to be the least of my problems.

The boot bashes into my shoulder, rolling me over. *That's what I was about to do, fucker*, I wanna say. I don't. Instead, I blink and look around, trying to orient myself as quickly as possible.

Cold concrete under me, fluorescent lights, high walls, pipes and metal staircases. Somewhere industrial. A big building, probably empty, probably somewhere in the middle of nowhere. The kind of building you get brought to by someone who's going to make you scream and doesn't want anybody to hear.

I laugh, a wet sound because my lungs are already a bit fucked. "*Privyet, Papa.*"

My father hates it when I speak Russian, and he hates it when I call him “Papa” and he hates me more than anything else in the world. And he’s a hateful man in general, so that’s saying a lot.

He kicks me in the face himself, this time. That’s how I know just how much he hates me. My father is a maniac, a despot and an abuser, but he never offers violence personally. That’s why he has so many henchmen. That’s why he has Anton, who stands behind him with his hands folded together and a resigned expression on his face. That’s why he keeps me around, the attack dog with the short leash.

“You think I sent you to your fancy British school because I wanted to hear you butcher my language?” he says. “Speak English, mutt.”

With one final boot to the jaw, he steps back and lets me rock painfully up. I sit and catch my breath for a second, arms balanced on my knees, head hanging low. A string of blood and saliva dribbles down from my chin and onto my hoodie, which is already wet and muddy from the ground.

Shit. Took me less than two weeks to ruin my Christmas present.

“Nice to see you too, Dad,” I mutter. I raise two fingers and throw Anton an apologetic look. “Hey, dedushka.”

He gives an almost imperceptible shake of his head from behind my father’s back. *No, it means. Don’t do this, patsan. Don’t dig yourself deeper into your grave.*

But my death has been a long time coming, and both Anton and I know it was always going to happen kinda like this. Maybe neither of us expected my father to come and deliver it personally.

Guess it shows how much he cares.

My father stands in front of me. I look at his shiny shoes, the impeccable crease of his trousers. I would rather not look him in the face. Not because I'm scared to look at him but because I'm scared of the red rush of uncontrollable fury that courses through me every time I look at him.

But he says, "Look at me, mutt."

So I do. He's going to hurt me a lot more, regardless. That much won't change. But maybe if I do what he asks and listen to what he has to say, he'll make this a little quicker, and Zahara won't be alone for too long.

That's the only thing I can think about.

Zahara, blinking her orphan fawn eyes when she wakes up to an empty bed. Zahara's beautiful smile melting away when she figures out I'm gone, when I confirm her stupid false belief that she's only good for fucking and throwing away. I'd rather eat every kick to the teeth my father has to throw, take every bullet he's been longing to put in my bones, than allow Zahara to believe that I willingly walked away from her.

I look up into my father's face. He's aged since the last I saw him. There are new wrinkles around his eyes, his eyes have receded deeper in the gaunt hollows of his eye sockets. His

hair is dyed a violent black that only manages to betray just how white it probably is. His eyes, though, remain the same. Cold, dead eyes, dark and narrow.

My eyes.

“What happened to the journalists?” he asks.

“I took care of it,” I say.

He boots me square in the face, and this time my nose breaks. I can't tell straight away because I black out the moment the kick connects with my face. But I come to what feels like a split second later. A sensation like swallowing too much mustard explodes in the centre of my face, my eyes water. I'm going to look a fucking state if I survive this.

If I don't, my corpse will be one hell of a mess. Good. I'll die like I lived, a fucked-up, worthless disaster from start to finish. Not that anyone will see my corpse. Vanishing bodies is my father's speciality.

He crouches and drags me to him by my collar. When I was thirteen years old and he came to steal me away from my mother and Lena—the first time I fought him—he grabbed me by the hair and smashed my face into the kitchen table. It was the first time he laid hands on me, the first of many. It was the first time I cried in front of him—and the last.

I shaved my hair down to the skull that very same night, and I've kept it this way ever since.

“I've been too easy on you,” he hisses into my face. “Too generous. Too lenient. No more. You think you can do

whatever you like because you're my son, but you're wrong. Maybe it's been too long since I reminded you of everything you have to lose."

The darkness inside me writhes, contracts, spreads. The red of anger mingles with the red of fear like pools of blood meeting.

"You're not going to kill Lena," I tell him. My voice is a wet, nasal mess. When I speak, the blood pouring down my face splashes out. "She's the only thing you have over me, old man. Your only bargaining chip."

"You think I don't know how to make you obey without Lena?" He gives a harsh, ugly laugh. He stands and kicks me back, crushing the air from my lungs, forcing me to catch myself on my elbows. "You stupid fucking mutt."

"Without Lena, you're nothing." I spit out a mouthful of blood. "If anything happens to her, either you die, or I die, or we both do." I bare my teeth at him. "And I'm not afraid to die, old man. I'd like nothing more than to take you with me."

"It's not death you should be afraid of, mutt. It's me." He takes out a cigarette from his pocket and lights it. His lighter is fancy, his initials inscribed into the metal. The tip of his cigarette flares red, and the smoke puffs out. I started smoking when I met him, and to this day I still hope the cancer takes him first.

"This was your last fuck-up. You know what people do with badly trained dogs? They put them down. So you're not scared of death—good for you, mutt. At least you know you're good

for nothing but dying. But if you're going to be afraid of anything, be afraid of everything I can do to your Lena *without* killing her. You went to a good school; you're smart enough to imagine the kind of things I'm talking about. Imagine them all, boy. Because there's nothing I'm not willing to do." He takes a long drag of his cigarette and exhales in a short, harsh puff. "Now. Are you going to obey?"

I nod. He picks at a fleck of tobacco and spits it out. "I said, are you going to obey?"

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, I will."

"Yes, *sir*," he says. There's a sick glint in his eyes, the perverse pleasure of a sadist inflicting pain. "Say it, mutt. Worthless scum son of a whore. Say it."

The red inside me blares, my head a chamber of flashing sirens. Crimson screams echo, filling the space. I know there and then I'm going to kill him. Not today, and maybe not soon. But one day. One day, I'll put a single bullet right through his skull. It'll be a quick death. A cleaner death than he deserves.

But he'll be dead, and if there's a hell, he'll burn in its lowest, darkest pits. I'll know; I'll be right there with him.

For now, I just need to get this over with as fast as possible.

"Yes, sir. I'll obey. Sir."

He laughs.

And then he punishes me.



HE'S NOT A VERY creative man. He has his methods, and he likes to stick to them. The days that follow aren't particularly pleasant. I spend it in and out of consciousness, on a cold concrete floor, or in a vat of ice-cold water.

The goons take over from my father, and they are full of energy and enthusiasm. I take more kicks to the face and body, from all angles. I have my shirt and trousers stripped off me, and my legs and legs struck with belts. The pain of each new blow slowly melts into the loud red pain of just generally existing in my body.

At one point, one of the goons holds my head so long underwater that I open my eyes and see, with complete and chilling clarity, the white hands of the old woman from Yalinka. They reach for me, and I scream into the water, bubbles exploding out of my mouth, swallowing mouthfuls of water. My lungs constrict and my body jerks.

*Come with me, boy, she says. You've had enough. You've had enough. Haven't you? I can hear how tired you are. Your body screams with it—the tiredness. But it's quiet down here. It's so quiet.*



*Not yet, I tell her through the darkness. Not yet, tyotyia. Lena needs me. Zahara needs me. She's waiting for me. Let me go to her.*

*And, I'll come to you when I'm ready, tyotyia. Just wait.*

I black out before they get me out of the water.



I WAKE UP IN the back of an SUV. The blacked-out windows shield me from the outside, obscuring the sky. I have no idea what day it is, or what time it is.

I sit up. My entire body is one pounding ache. Every limb is a screeching wail. My mind is a sluggish, muddy place. I look down at myself. I'm wearing my black sweatpants and hoodie. They're filthy but dry.

I look up.

Anton sits in front of me. He turns around when he hears me move. His face is carefully blank. His eyes are not so careful; there's a fucking volcano of sadness erupting from them.

“You're up. How are you feeling?”

I try to let out a laugh, but my ribcage feels like it's been pulverised. “I feel how you look. Like complete shit.”

“You think this is funny, patsan?” Anton’s voice takes on a harsher edge. He’s angry. “You don’t know how fucking much he wants to kill you?”

“If he wanted me dead, I’d already be dead.”

“You fucking idiot. Even if Andrei wasn’t—” He stops himself, slams his hand down. “Pavel doesn’t *waste* resources. He’ll use you as long as he can. So stop being fucking useless, patsan.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“Back where we found you.” Annoyance flashes across Anton’s features. “Are you listening to me, patsan? Just do what you’re told, for fuck’s sake. You’re gonna die over what, over the lives of two journalists, two pussies who hide behind keyboards?”

“I already said I’ll do what I’m told,” I grunt. “Calm down. You’re all worked up, old man. You need to get laid.”

“Your life isn’t a joke, patsan. Stop treating it like one.”

I grin at him. Even smiling is painful. My mouth tastes like blood and metal. Some of my teeth are cracked, and the swelling in my face is throbbing so hard I swear I can almost hear it. “You’ve grown soft in your old age.”

“You’re a good kid, Yasha.” Anton rarely calls me that. It makes the aching in my body rush inwards, a different kind of pain. “You deserve a good life. You could have a good life, for fuck’s sake. Things don’t have to be like this.”

“As long as he’s alive, things will stay like this.”

Anton's face goes pale. "All you have to do is listen. Is it so hard? Do what you're told, and he'll give you anything you want."

I know Anton believes what he's saying. It's how he can stomach living this life. He does whatever my father tells him. In exchange, he drives the best cars, sends his kids to the best schools, owns a house in Moscow and one in the Maldives. Anything he wants, he can buy. Anything his wife and kids want, they can have. It's enough for him.

"He can't give me the things I want, Anton." I slump back into the seat and close my eyes. In the darkness, I see Lena, painting with her watercolours. I see Zach and Theo laughing at their kitchen table. I see Zahara, safe and loved and happy in my arms, all the sadness banished from her brown eyes. "I can't have any of the things I want."

Anton falls silent.

"Don't drop me off in Knightsbridge," I tell him later. "I need to go somewhere else first."

"Where?"

"To visit a friend."

"You have friends now?" Anton asks.

But I know that's just his way of being nice.



HE DROPS ME OFF in front of the black gates nestled in the pine trees, not far outside of London. Before he leaves, he lowers the window and says, “Fix the journo situation, patsan. Fix your shit, then come home. Behave. Do what you need to do. Things will turn out okay. You’ll see.”

“Don’t worry. I’m going to fix everything.”

And maybe because I’m delirious from all the bruising and cold water, or because my brain is a nest of wriggling black worms, I grab Anton’s face through the car window and kiss him square on his forehead.

“Get the fuck off me!” he yells gruffly.

“I love you, dedushka.”

“Fuck off. You madman. Fucking brain damage. I’m married, asshole!” He shows me his wedding ring like he’s flipping me off.

I shrug. “Just say you love me too, fucker.”

He does. And then he’s gone.



I CLIMB OVER THE gate and up the white steps. I ignore the doorbell and slam my fists into the door. The barking of dogs answers me. Two minutes later, the door swings open.

Luca is wearing fancy white pants and black shoes and no top. His chest and face are gleaming with a thin film of sweat. There's a white helmet with a visor like a grill wedged under his arm.

He rakes me with a look and steps aside to let me in with a smile that does nothing to disguise his obvious delight.

“Rough night, Kav?”

“Can't complain.”

“You never do. A true stoic. If you could eat punches for breakfast you would.” His smile widens viciously and he leans forward, scrutinising my face. “Looks like you already have, in fact.” He raises a gloved hand and pokes my cheek. Pain shoots through my face like he's just stabbed me. My face twitches. Luca laughs. “You look utterly fucked, Kav. Whoever's done this—it's excellent work.”

“Don't pretend you don't know.” I push him away from me with a firm hand. “All this creepy spy shit in your basement

and you couldn't warn me my father was on his way to fuck me up?"

He raises his hands, his helmet still wedged under one arm. "I genuinely missed it, Kav." And then he turns around and throws me a sinister smirk. "Not that I would've told you if I'd known. I was rather pissed off at you."

He walks to his bar and pours me a drink. I watch him and speak to his back. "I don't want you to hurt her," I tell him.

He doesn't ask who I mean; he already knows.

"She'll be fine." He turns around and hands me a glass of clear liquor. Vodka. What a gent. "In any case, put it out of your mind. You're just going to get yourself worked up if you don't."

The grey of his pupils is sickly, like the underside of an underground creature. The outer ring is darker, the pupils are small and piercing. His eyelashes are pale, just like his hair and his skin. He's the closest thing to inhuman I've ever seen a human being look.

"Not if I don't give you her address."

He smiles, a twisted rictus.

"But you're going to. It's why you came here, after all."

# Beaten Dog

## Zahara

IAKOV STANDS IN MY flat with a cup of coffee in one hand and a white paper bag of pastries in the other. His smile is sheepish—it's barely visible through the landscape of contusions his face has been transformed into.

Looking at him is physically painful. The sight of him is a deadly blow straight to the centre of my chest. It makes my heart cave in from the pain of it.

“Too late for breakfast?” he asks in a light tone.

His voice is rough like he has a sore throat. His eyes are dull black almonds in their bruised sockets. He has two black eyes and his nose looks like it's been broken and then smashed back into place.

I've seen him in terrible states before. I've seen him after fights and after he'd come back from Russia, back when I was sixteen. I've seen bruises on his cheekbones and cuts on his knuckles and his lips.

I've never seen him like this.

I don't even think I've seen anything like this, ever. Not even in movies.

In movies, heroes get beautifully injured, they have wounds and scratches that enhance their good looks. In real life, Iakov's face looks like someone pummelled it with a bag of rocks.



“Iakov.”

It hurts to speak, it hurts to say his name. Everything hurts.

He sets down the coffee and paper bag, which seem so normal and out of place in his hands when he looks like this.

“Zahara,” he says, low and so very soft.

I don’t even remember crossing the distance between us. All I know is that a moment passes in a blink, and then I’m collapsing into Iakov’s chest. He catches me, wrapping his thick arms around me. He murmurs something but I don’t hear over the deafening sound of my frantic sobs.

Why am I weeping? Because I’m sad and scared and because my heart feels like it’s just been torn into pieces. I weep because of Iakov, not just his face, or how rough his voice sounds, and not even because whatever Iakov just went through, he still made sure to come home with a sweet treat for me.

I weep for all of him.

His flat in Chertanovo. The black snakes on his chest, his entire collection of tattoos. The sister he never talks about and his life. His dark eyes, so empty, and his shorn hair, like a prisoner. All of it is painful.

I think about every time he carried my things for me, when I was sixteen, and every time I called him a dog name. I think about the softening of his face when he’s around Zach and Theo, I think about Iakov lying on his bedroom floor in the dead of night trying his best to read Plato’s *Republic* because

Zach asked him to. I think about Iakov not going to university, working for his father, looking after me. I think about all the cigarettes he smokes, his blackened lungs because he genuinely believes he's good for nothing but dying.

And I think about how I never see Iakov smile. I only ever see him serious or tired or calm or fighting or injured. Even when he laughs, he never smiles. I never see him smile.

What does he have to smile about?

He never smiles, and he never cries; he has nothing to smile about and every reason to weep.

So I weep for him.



AFTER I'VE CRIED MYSELF empty and the sobs have subsided enough in my chest to let me form full sentences, I take Iakov's hand and lead him to the bathroom. He sits on the edge of the bathtub and I stand in front of him, cradling his chin in one hand. With the other, I delicately dab Arnica gel onto his bruises.

If it hurts or stings, Iakov doesn't show it. He sits as still and obedient and placid as a well-trained dog. I glance into his eyes.

“Is this alright?” I whisper, brushing wet streaks of Arnica into the black hollows beneath his eyes.

“Yea.”

“Are you sure we can’t go to the hospital?”

“No need.” Then, a moment later, “I’ll be fine.”

I don’t say anything. There’s a lump in my throat I try to push back down; I don’t want to cry again. I want to be strong for him, to look after him the way he always looks after me.

When I reach for the hem of his hoodie, he hesitates for a moment before lifting his arms. I pull the dirty garment over his head and toss it into the hamper. I bite down on a gasp of shock. His chest, underneath all his tattoos, is a mottled map of blue and purple and brown. Bright red welts wrap around the sides of his arms and shoulders. I swallow hard, eyes burning, and lean to the side of him. This time, I can’t help the hoarse cry that drops out of my mouth.

The skin of his back is striped with angry red marks. In some places, he’s been struck so hard the skin has opened, gaping red wounds all crusted over with dark globs of coagulated blood.

Iakov’s hand wraps around my wrist, and he pulls me to face him once more.

“It looks worse than it is,” he says.

I shake my head, eyes burning. “You don’t lie to me, remember?”

He gives a half-smile, a hollow half-grin that makes my chest collapse in on itself. “I’m stronger than I look. A dog that can take a beating.”

“Dogs don’t deserve to be beaten,” I tell him, voice breaking. “And you’re not a dog.”

“M’not?” he mumbles with a little laugh that makes him immediately wince in pain. “You’ve upgraded me, Kolyuchka?”

I wish I had his resilience; I couldn’t laugh now if I tried. I can barely keep myself from breaking down into tears all over again.

I force myself to concentrate on my task. I make him sit facing the inside of the bathtub, and I clean out the wounds, dress them as best I can. He’s quiet the entire time, sitting motionless, not making a noise when I rub antiseptic around his wounds. I’m the first one to break the silence.

“Who did this to you?”

“You know who,” he breathes.

His father, then. His father, again. His piece of shit, deplorable, despicable, monster of a father. I think of mine, of how much he’s hurt me without ever laying hands on me. I think of Iakov’s father—the hatred he must have for Iakov to do this to him. How can a father hate his own son so very much? How can anybody hate someone enough to do this to them?

“Why?” I ask. “Or—does he not need a reason?”

“He wanted me to kill two journalists. I didn’t do it.”

We lapse into silence for another long moment. I don’t even know what to say to that. I’ve always known Iakov lives a violent life, the exact kind of life I’ve been sheltered from.

But hearing it so starkly put makes it brutally real. Iakov is no more a born killer than I am—how could his father ask this of him? How can he be allowed to get away with this?

“Can’t—can’t we go to the police? Or—”

“No. We can’t.”

“But there’s got to be something we can do, something I can do—I could speak to my father, tell him—”

Iakov turns around and stands. I step back, looking up at him pleadingly. I can’t not help him, I can’t just sit there and do nothing.

“Zahara. Everything’s gonna be alright. Okay?” He takes my face into his hands with terrible tenderness. “I never lie to you—remember?”

I nod, but I’m more lost and afraid than I’ve ever felt before. All my problems—everything I thought was a problem—seem suddenly so small and insignificant.

Iakov swipes his thumbs lightly over my eyelashes, brushing away the tears blossoming there. Then he wraps his arms around me, holding me tight to his bruised chest. I feel the firm press of his lips on the top of my head. He speaks into my head, murmuring over and over again.

“Everything’s gonna be alright.”



HE DOESN'T PROTEST WHEN I lead him to my bed; it wouldn't have occurred to me to let him go back to his. I pull the blankets back and help him down. He lies on his side, his back probably too sore to rest against. I curl up right into his chest, his arms wrapped around me, my face nestled in the crook of his neck. He smells of blood and disinfectant. His skin, though, is warm as ever, radiating heat like a flame.

He dozes off quickly—almost straight away. I follow him into sleep, exhausted from crying and worrying, exhausted from the relief of having him back, of having him safe right here in my bed.

I wake up later, unsure how long I slept. Iakov is still asleep, and I drag my head back over the pillow to watch him. How is this the first time I see Iakov asleep? Why does it have to be like this, when I can barely make out his features through his bruises?

I trail my fingers over his cheeks, his nose, his bloodied lips. I make a vow to love every part of him that's been hurt, to place a hundred kisses over every place that's received a bruise or a cut.

I swear to myself to lavish so much love upon Iakov Kavinski that he won't know what to do with it. And I swear to myself to make him smile and laugh. I've always been so obsessed with being loved, being happy. None of it has even been as important as this. Making sure Iakov is loved, making sure Iakov is happy.

He wakes up a while later, blinking slowly. He tries to move, seems to remember he can't lie on his back, and slumps forward. I catch him in my arms, the weight of him lying on my heart.

"How're you feeling?" I ask, my breath cut short by the weight of him.

"Like I've been run over by a train, got up, and then run over by another train going the opposite way."

"That good?" I say lightly.

"Amazing," he says with a wheezing laugh. "I feel fucking amazing."

*You don't, I think, not yet. But you will.*

# Salvation & Damnation



## Zahara

I AKOV SPENDS THE NEXT week fighting me, and I fight him back. He fights me when I try to tend his wounds, he fights me when I try to stop him from smoking cigarettes and working out. He fights me when I miss classes and tutorials.

“You don’t have to look after me,” he tells me one afternoon when I’m changing his bandages.

“Who else is going to do it?” I reply. “All the nurses and doctors in the hospital you refuse to go to?”

“The body heals itself,” he mutters.

“It does so better with a little help. Seriously, I’m beginning to understand why you look the way you do.”

“Like shit?”

I jab his shoulder. “Stop fishing for compliments.”

When he’s not fighting me and forcing me to fight him back, we do other things. We sit at the kitchen table eating pastries and trying to work our way through Plato so he can finally finish the book. Iakov watches me blearily while I water and dust my plants, or drifts in and out of sleep while I write my dissertation or read him some of my romance novels. Sometimes, we just lie on the couch watching period dramas, my body comfortably plastered along the side of his.

At night, he sleeps in my bed. The mere idea of him returning to his room is a personal insult. I know he’ll try,

eventually. One night, he'll simply head in there and go to sleep, and when I challenge him he'll say something stupid about how he shouldn't be sleeping in his best friend's little sister's bed.

But I like him in my bed. I like the solidity of his body, the heat it exudes. I like it when he sleeps on his side and I curl up gingerly against his back with one arm around his waist and my forehead pressed to the knife tattoo on his back. I like how I feel when he's in my bed, like it's okay to sleep because I'm finally safe.

One morning, I wake up slowly, lazily, to a stormy morning and a single silver ray of pallid sunlight. I'm lying on my side, and Iakov's body is wrapped around mine, a radiating furnace. His big thigh is wedged against mine, and something hard pushes against the curve of my ass.

I wriggle against it, at first because I assume it's just a fold in the blanket, but a sound stops me in my tracks.

A groan, low in Iakov's throat. I freeze and wait for a moment. Is he awake? I doubt it. Iakov would never allow himself this kind of indulgence, not with me in his arms.

Dipping my head into my pillow, I arch my back, sliding gently upwards. This time, the groan is more of a stifled sigh. Does Iakov think he's dreaming? Am I? It's hard to think clearly when I'm so warm, when he's so close, when he's so hard and I'm so wet and everything between us is so hopelessly, terribly complicated.

I squirm against him, caught in a tangle of conflicting emotions. Lust and guilt, despair and shame. My conscience and my hunger wage war, and my body is the battlefield. Why should I not want him? He's the only person in the world who sees me for who I am and still wants me. So why can't I want him back? Why can't I have him?

*"Zahara."*

The syllables of my name come out slurred and harsh, just as his hands clamp down on my hips. His voice is gritty from sleep, but the movement with which he pushes me away is firm and authoritative.

"No." I turn around and wrap my arms around his neck, pressing closer. No matter how much he pushes me away, his body tells me the truth of what he feels. I kiss the corner of his jaw. "Please."

I reach down between us, slipping my hand into his boxers. He's full and hard and warm in my hand, and I watch the muscles in his jaws twitch as he bites down on a groan.

"Please," I murmur into his ear. "Iakov. Let me."

He says nothing, but his cock hardens in my fingers. For such a quiet, monosyllabic guy, his body sure does a lot of the speaking for him. He lies slowly back and I follow him, kissing his jaw, sucking on his neck, careful to avoid his healing bruises. He lets me pull his boxers down, and when I climb carefully on top of him, his hands wrap around my waist, helping me stay balanced.

“I know you want this,” I tell him in a whisper, like a confession, looking deep into his eyes. “It’s not wrong to want this. I want it too. I want you *so much*.” Sliding aside my silk panties, I align myself with the head of his cock, letting him feel how wet I am for him. “See?”

“Fuck,” he says, except that he says it in a long, breathless grunt, and his voice breaks at the end. *Fuuuc—*

I lower myself on him, taking deep breaths, wondering if I’ll ever get used to the size of him. I try to keep my eyes on his, but the further I lower myself, the more intense the stretching sensation gets. My eyes roll into the back of my head when I finally sink on top of him. For a second, I can’t do anything except take in ragged breaths, letting my body adjust to him. I feel so full I can hardly breathe—so full I’m certain I could never feel empty again.

Iakov’s fingers tighten on my waist. My eyelids flutter open to find him staring up at me.

“Am I hurting you?” he asks, voice tight with concern.

I shake my head, too breathless to speak. *No*, I want to tell him. *You’re not hurting me. You would never hurt me. You never will.*

And the knowledge of this is so clear in my mind I’m caught in a terrible chokehold of pure emotion. I gaze down at Iakov, his buzz cut and his bruised face and his dark eyes, full of that concerned expression, like the idea of hurting me is the worst thing he can possibly think of.

“You feel good,” I sigh, slowly moving myself up and down.  
“You feel *so* good. God, I think I lo—I think I—”

He sits up against me, his hands wrapping around, and his mouth covers mine, silencing my stuttering words. His kiss is deep and searching and tastes a little bit like blood from the cut in his lip. He holds me in his lap, supporting me as I bounce myself slowly up and down on his cock. I hold on to his shoulders as carefully as I can, afraid of hurting him, but pain doesn't seem to register as he cradles my head in one hand, pulls it back, kisses my neck, tasting the sweat beading there.

“Beautiful,” he mutters against my throat. “So beautiful it hurts.” He pulls away from my throat, a tiny filament of saliva briefly connecting his lips to my neck before breaking. His eyes meet mine and he gives me a crooked, rueful smile. “Too beautiful for me.”

I shake my head, but he's growing harder inside me, and his hips are meeting mine in harder, faster thrusts. My mouth falls open as I try to gather my emotions, to tell him how I feel, how good I feel, how good he makes me feel, how I don't think I can live without him and how I think I might love him —

But then he sticks his tongue out and swipes his thumb across it. A quick, casual gesture, but it makes me shudder and clench around him. He brings his wet thumb down between my legs, finding my clit and stroking it in a slick, steady rhythm.

“Oh god—d—” I cry out, voice breaking, my entire body stiffening, shivering. “Iakov, god, I—”

“Come for me, Zahara.” His voice is just as broken as mine, his commands are spoken like prayers. “*Spasitel, proklyatie.* Come for me.”

I come at his command, I come hard under his strong, steady hand, in the embrace of his protective arm. I come with a cry of pleasure, shuddering all over, clenching over his cock as he buries himself inside me, letting me writhe on top of him. I come like I’m dying, and if I died right now then it wouldn’t be so bad.

His orgasm chases mine. When he comes, his arms wrap around me like he never wants to let go. He buries his face in my neck and mutters a string of words into my skin.

“I love you too,” I think I hear him say, but I’m still blinking away starlight, and my lungs are loud with my breath, and all I can do is hold on tight to him and hope he never lets go.



I MANAGE TO BUY myself one more day of peace. One more day of hiding in my apartment with Iakov. One more day of just living, just the two of us, without fear or hunger or danger. One final night of slipping into sleep like sliding into a

bath, as if sleep is a kingdom that was up till now forbidden to me.

Then I return to my normal life. Iakov doesn't give me a choice.

"Cowards hide," he says to me in the morning, when I cling to him fully dressed and refuse to step out of the front door. "Life is for living, not for cowering."

"If I come back and you're not there," I tell him, "I don't think I'll be able to handle it. I can't stand the idea of you getting hurt. I can't stand the idea of you being gone."

"I'll be here when you come back," he says. He presses a kiss to my hair and takes my face in his hands, forcing me to look up. "I'll be here, Zahara Blackwood, always."

"Promise me."

"I swear it. Unless I'm dead, I'll be here."

But that's exactly what I'm afraid of.

So I refuse to leave until he swears he won't die. He gives me a smile—one of his melancholy half-smiles, black like his black eyes.

"Everybody dies, Kolyuchka."

"Not you. You have to live. I command it."

"I can't live forever."

"Then live until I allow you to die."

He watches me in silence for a long time. Then he drops to his knees, startling me, and he bows his head in front of me,

resting his forehead against my thighs.

“Until you allow me to die, then. I swear it.”



# Black Hole

## Iakov

I DON'T BREAK MY promise to Zahara Blackwood because I'm a liar. I don't even break it because I never meant to keep it. I did.

I break my promise to her because my world comes crashing down on me.



MY PHONE BUZZES FROM where it's been sitting on a corner of Zahara's velvet couches. For the past week, it's been slowly gathering messages. Random texts from Evan and Sev, checking in or soliciting advice or sending pictures in the group chat. A few texts from Anton, asking if I'm still alive and if I've sorted the situation with the journos yet. A flurry of texts from Zach.

I've been meaning to respond to them all. But when my text buzzes this time, a few hours after I got on my knees to swear my life and fealty to Zahara and sent her on her way to university, I know this isn't a text I'm going to ignore. I sense it before I ever pick up my phone.

Maybe it's the dark writhing shadow inside my chest, or the reaching of ghostly fingers. Maybe it's the animal instinct that

once made me the Blood Wolf of Yalinka, the same instinct that makes my father call me “mutt”. But I know something is wrong before I pick up the phone, and my heartbeat quickens when I see Luca’s name on my screen.

I open the text with a flick of my thumb.

**Luca:** Come see me, Kav.

I respond to him immediately.

**Iakov:** Bike is bust. Send a car.

**Luca:** Already have.



LUCA’S FACE IS A clean knife, a blank blade. He’s wearing a crisp white shirt and black slacks, his hair is slicked back. The dogs follow him like shadows through the house as he leads me to his creepy basement.

There, he hands me a drink.

“We celebrating?” I ask, jaw tight because I know we’re not.

“Drink, old chap.”

I drink, and he drinks with me. We watch each other across the room. The clinical white lights make me feel like I’m about to receive a fatal diagnosis from a stony-faced doctor.

“You found Lena?” I ask finally.

“Sit down and listen.” Luca speaks like a doctor, emotionless and practical. He doesn’t raise his voice, doesn’t seem worried or angry or sad or tense. “I did what you asked, and what I’m about to tell you is best said face to face. Maybe part of you already knows what I’m about to tell you. I just need to warn you that if you raise a hand on me, Cerberus here will tear you apart, and I don’t want either of us dead, so I’m asking you to keep your cool.”

“You’re already winding me up by dragging this shit out, Fletch.” I try to speak lightly because the darkness inside my chest is an imploding mass, a black hole sucking at my organs, cracking the structure of my ribcage. “Spit it out.”

Luca is silent for a moment. I would have guessed he was enjoying this if his face wasn’t so pale. Paler than usual.

“Lena’s dead,” I say.

The words fall from my mouth like black bile, like a black rock that was lodged in my throat all my life, finally spat out.

“Yes.”

My father’s face flashes across my memory, as clearly as if he was standing right in front of me. His words last time I saw him.

*You think I don’t know how to make you obey without Lena?*

He warned me all these years, and all these years, I grew complacent. I thought he would never kill Lena because Lena’s death would mean his life was forfeit. But my father doesn’t fear death at my hands. He’s the man holding both the

leash and the gun. If the dog gets off the leash, he can shoot it dead.

Except this is worse than being shot dead. Worse than taking bullets in every limb, an agony like a knuckle duster punch straight to the vital organs. It makes my chest cave in on itself. The force of it makes me keel forward.

“Your father is a real piece of shit, Kav,” Luca says by way of condolences. “I’m not a nice guy, but even I wouldn’t stoop to slaughtering children.”

“She was only two years younger than me,” I say. My voice comes out dull and thick. “Not a child. A woman.”

It’s a strange thought. My little sister—a woman.

“Ah, no, Kav, you misunderstand me.”

I look up at Luca. “What?”

“She died in Yalinka—where you grew up. The year before you started Spearcrest. She was ten years old. He took great pains—and probably an extraordinary amount of money—to bribe police, falsify documents and bury the news. He’s very good at covering up deaths, your father. But he let your mum give her a proper burial, and she still visits the grave every year. That’s how I found her.”

The inside of me is an empty place. The darkness of my waiting death, the crimson of my anger—it’s all gone. My mind, my chest—they are as blank and empty as the soulless grey abyss of Luca’s eyes. I watch him, and I feel nothing at all.

“My mother’s alive.”

“Your mother’s alive. Maybe your father has some semblance of a conscience, or maybe he’s interested in buying her silence—who knows. She lives a good life, as far as I can tell.” His mouth curves sideways into a rictus of bitter amusement. “If you don’t count her dead kid and her stolen one, of course. She’s married now. I don’t know if you care to know that? And you have another sister, a half-sister, I suppose. I doubt she knows anything. She seems like nothing more than an ordinary little girl growing up in St Petersburg.”

I think about Lyceum No237, the one Danyl Stepanovich coughed up after making me work so hard all these years. The fact I didn’t find my sister there, and the way I thought he had lied to me, made me up some bullshit to get me off his back.

I think of the little girl sitting outside, and how I wondered if she looked like Lena because I forgot what Lena’s face looked like.

“Her name is Darina,” Luca adds. “I don’t know how much more of this you want to know, Kav. Your face is a scary fucking thing. I can get your mother’s address for you if you like, but I’m fairly certain your father keeps a close eye on her and her family. I have no skin in the game, though. If you want the address, I’ll give it to you.”

“No.”

I stand up, and Luca stiffens—ever so slightly. The dogs shift. One of them steps forward. The other two just watch me. Their animal eyes are free of emotion. The muscles tensing

underneath the lacquer of their fur remind me of the danger I'm in.

“Give me my father’s London address.”

Luca does so without so much as a snarky comment. Maybe it’s because he feels sorry for me—as much as Luca is capable of feeling sorry for anyone. Most likely it’s because he can tell my world is crashing down on me, and he doesn’t want to be first in line when I finally lose my sanity.

Can’t lose something you never really had, though.



“LEND ME ONE OF your cars,” I tell Luca on my way out.

“Why, so you can drive it off a bridge?”

I turn to look at him. “What was it you said? Death isn’t a punishment, it’s a gift?”

“I said reward.”

“You still believe that, Fletch?”

He tilts his head and narrows his eyes. “Killing yourself won’t bring your sister back, Kav.”

“I don’t need one of your poncey Aston Martins to commit suicide, Fletch. I need one to deliver a—what did you call it? A gift.”

“As if your father isn’t going to put a bullet in your skull the moment you step into his personal space.”

I round on him just as we reach the front door to his house. He doesn’t seem startled, but his eyes widen slightly when I fist my hand in the front of his fancy white shirt and half lift him to me.

“So nice of you to care, Fletch.”

“You have one life, Kav. Don’t waste it.”

I open my mouth to tell him that I’m not going to die—that I’m not allowed to die. Something makes the words rush back down my throat, and I snap my mouth shut. Zahara, in this moment, feels as distant as a fast-fading dream.

All this time—everything I did—I did it thinking I was protecting Lena.

I left my family, my friends and my home to keep Lena safe. I spent my adolescence between Spearcrest and Russia, I obeyed and followed orders. I ate every punch and got my hands so dirty the tears of angels couldn’t wash them clean. I became a silent henchman, a brainless mutt for my father to use.

All that to keep Lena safe.

But I failed the mission before it ever began. I didn’t keep Lena safe. I got her killed.

I couldn’t keep her safe, and she was the first person I ever swore to myself I would protect. So why do I think I can keep Zahara safe? Why did I ever allow myself to believe I was any



use to anyone, that I was anything more than a rabid, mindless beast, good for nothing but violence and death?

Violence and death are in my blood, after all. My sole inheritance, my fucked-up legacy.

“Lend me a car, Fletch,” I said.

I let go of Luca’s shirt and he fixes it with a lazy sweep of his hand. He looks at his dogs, sitting in a perfect triangle with me in their centre, and he gives a sharp, low whistle that makes them scatter. Then he looks back at me with a curt nod. “Come on, then.”



THE DRIVE IS A blur—I might as well have teleported to my destination. I don’t even remember where I park. My mind is curiously blank, my chest feels like a wall where a painting used to sit. Nothing is left but an empty square where the image once was.

I try to picture Lena, but I can’t.

Maybe that’s why I could never picture her in my head. Because my mind was trying to tell me Lena was gone, and my heart refused to believe it until now.

Maybe this is where the emptiness inside me comes from. Not Lena’s absence—but her death.



MY FATHER'S ADDRESS IS in my pocket, but it's not time to see him yet.

I find Anton smoking a cigarette outside a five-star restaurant in Westminster. He almost drops his lighter in surprise when he sees me. Before he can mumble a greeting around his cigarette, I've already grabbed him by the lapels of his coat. I drag him into the nearest alley. He's a stocky guy, and still strong despite his age, but he's no match for me.

I half-throw him into a wall, and then I pin him there with my forearm just like I did the journalist. I make sure I press on his neck with the bony edge of my arm, digging hard. His voice comes out strangled, in an exhalation of smoke.

"Patsan, what are—"

"Did you know?" I ask him.

"Know what? What are you—"

I press harder, crushing his voice into silence.

"Yelena Orlova. My little sister. The one I've been protecting all these years." His face is growing more purple as I speak, veins throbbing in his temples. His eyes bulge wide. I clarify. "Did you know she was *dead*?"

He lets out a choking sound. “No, no, Yelena’s not dead. She lives in St Petersburg with Dani, Pavel said—”

“No, that’s not her. Yelena’s dead. Buried in Yalinka. Yelena’s *dead*, Anton.”

And now that I’m saying it out loud, now that I’m crushing Anton to the wall and yelling the words in his face, it suddenly feels heinously real.

Yelena’s dead.

Yelena’s fucking *dead*.

Dead at ten years old. Dead before she had a chance to become a woman, to become a teenager even. Her life taken from her before it even began.

Yelena died before she could even get a new watercolour set.

“I didn’t know—I swear it, I swear it on the Virgin Mary, I fucking swear it, Iakov—Yasha, listen to me—*I didn’t know*.”

I grab his face in my hand, I squeeze his skull hard through his skin. I want to feel the bone crack in my fingers, I want to close my fist on a handful of pulverised bone and pulped flesh.

“She’s fucking *dead!*” I shout in his face. My voice is hoarse and gravelly, a skeleton of itself. “She’s fucking dead, old man, you’re telling me you didn’t know?”

“I. Didn’t. Know,” he grinds out.

I release his face and he half collapses to the ground, coughing and choking. I watch him in pure disbelief, in anger, in disorientating, blinding grief.

“She’s fucking *dead*,” I cry out, like I’m trying to get him to understand, like he’s not hearing me.

“I didn’t know, I swear it, I fucking swear it.” Anton scrambles upright, grabs me by the nape of the neck, anchoring his fingers to the bottom of my skull. “I swear it on the heads of my wife and daughters. Yasha, I swear it on Natalya’s soul.”

Natalya. His youngest daughter, the apple of his eye. Natalya is ten years old—the same age Lena was when she died.

I look into Anton’s face and my breath is a crushing weight in my chest. I can’t choke air through my throat. I watch him, gasping in shock, in disbelief, in fury, in sorrow.

“I didn’t know,” Anton repeats, pressing my forehead down against his, pressing hard, his forehead to mine. His eyes are grim and dark. His mouth is a twisted grimace of sadness. “I didn’t know,” he says, and, “I’m sorry.”

And then that’s all he says for a long moment.

“I’m sorry, I’m so fucking sorry, Yasha. I’m so sorry.”

Special

## Zahara

THERE ARE MOMENTS IN your life that exist before they happen. They seem to hover over your shoulder, like a raven watching you, following you from tree to tree, the black shadow of what's about to happen to you.

You see it from the corner of your eye. You know something's wrong, but you don't know what. You don't quite understand what the world is trying to warn you about. You just know something is going to happen.

You only ever find out what it is once it happens to you.

But by then, of course, it's far too late.



I'M DISTRACTED ALL DAY. Throughout my lectures, and during my quick lunch with Rhiannon in the campus café. She immediately works out I'm distracted—she always does—and it doesn't take her long to wheedle some of the truth out of me. It's not my place to tell her Iakov's business, so I don't, but I tell her he was injured, and I spent the past week looking after him.

“So you two finally an item, then?” she asks.

“It’s not like that,” I tell her.

Because it’s not. I have no idea *what* we are.

“I don’t think we’ll ever be an item,” I tell her, and it feels sort of good to get that particular heartbreaking thought off my chest. “I don’t think he’ll ever get over the fact that I’m his best friend’s sister.”

“He’ll get over it,” Rhiannon says with a confident smile. “He fucking loves you, Zaro.” She leans across the table. “And you love him too, you little lovesick doll.”

I don’t even deny it.



WITH ONLY A COUPLE of months left to submit my dissertation, there’s no chance I can miss my next tutorial with Professor Sterling. I try to concentrate while he runs me through his feedback on my latest draft, but I can’t stop the nervous bouncing of my leg. I can’t even bring myself to laugh properly at his jokes. When our hour is over, I stand up and quickly pack all my things away.

Professor Sterling walks me to his door. When we reach it, he places his hand on the door handle but doesn’t open it. Instead, he stands over me, looking deep into my eyes, and he says, “I hope you know how special you are, Zahara.”

Men are so good at telling you what you want to hear, but if there's one thing I've learned from Iakov, it's that actions mean far more than words ever can.

I look up at him and wonder, almost absently, if he's going to kiss me. It wouldn't surprise me if he did. There's a peculiar look in his eyes, a strange tension in his body. He looks a little messier than usual, his hair rumpled, his loosened tie crooked. There's a faint smell of coffee and stale sweat coming from him.

"Thank you, Professor," I answer, unsure what else to say.

He looks at me and hesitates like he wants to say something but isn't sure if he should. Finally, he says, "I'm worried about you, you know?"

I try to give him a reassuring smile, but even I'm not convinced.

"I'm alright, you don't have to worry about me. I can take care of myself."

For the first time, I mean it. Maybe it's my *kolyuchka* knife, which I carry with me everywhere. Maybe it's my self-defence lessons with Iakov. Or maybe I'm just sick of always being the tragic victim in my own story.

Professor Sterling nods, licks his lips. "It's just... I'm worried about that man I saw you with on the night of your birthday."

I frown. "James?"



“No, not Verma.” There’s something odd in Professor Sterling’s voice, a strain, barely perceptible. “The thug in the leather jacket.”

I swallow, and for some reason, a flutter of nerves ripples through me.

“You don’t have to worry about him, Professor. He’s just... my brother’s friend. He’s not a thug, he’s”—I think about Iakov, on his knees in front of me, his big fingers unlacing my shoes with the gentleness of a dove—“a perfect gentleman.”

Professor Sterling gazes at me and raises a hand to brush hair back from my face. He doesn’t quite touch me, but there’s still something disturbingly intimate about the gesture.

“I hated it,” he says. “I hated seeing the way he had his arm around you, the way he walked you out like he thought you were his. He doesn’t deserve you, you know that? None of them do.”

My mouth drops open, moving soundlessly as my mind scrambles for words. I don’t know what to say to him—I don’t even know how I feel.

I’ve had a crush on Professor Sterling ever since I met him in my first year of university. So why doesn’t this feel good? It *should* feel good, right?

Except my heart is beating fast and sweat moistens my palms. I purposely keep my leg still, but every part of my body is tense, every part of my body is telling me to get out of there, to *run*.

Why?

My eyes, avoiding his, sweep the room. It's always felt so comforting and familiar. The tidy bookshelves, the plants—all plants I have in my own house. The display case, placed furthest from the windows, where he keeps his most ancient and prized books. At the centre of the display, a fifteenth-century copy of Chrétien de Troyes's *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart*.

I know because it was the first thing I ever noticed in his office, back in my first year, and he stood by my side and told me about it, pride lighting up his face. At the time, I was enamoured with his passion.

Now, my eyes stay stuck to the volume, opened on an illuminated page, and my mind is loud with alarm bells.

“He doesn't think I'm his,” I tell Professor Sterling finally, forcing myself to meet his gaze, forcing myself to stay calm. It's not even a lie anyway. It's the sad, depressing truth. I laugh, the airiest sound I can muster. “I'm nobody's, Professor Sterling. Just Zahara's.”

Professor Sterling smiles, but the strain is still there. The alarms in my head are getting louder, telling me to *get the fuck out*. I ignore them and wait for Professor Sterling to open the door. He gives me a little complicit look over his glasses, as if we're partners in crime.

“You're not nobody's,” he says as I finally walk out of his office. “You're my little historian, remember?”

I laugh and give him a little wave. And then, the moment I've turned the corner, I run.



SNOW SPINS THROUGH THE campus, obscuring the orange glow of lampposts. The sky is pitch black, the noises of the city stifled by the blanket of snow slowly covering the pavements, trees and buildings.

I hasten through the courtyard, bracing myself against the cold and the panic still surging through me. Plunging my hands into my coat pockets, I wrap my hands around the cold metal of my knife. For a moment, I almost feel as if Iakov is standing at my shoulder, the dark shadow of him casting a protective spell around me nobody in the world could break.

On the cab back to my apartment, I open my phone and text Rhiannon and Sanvi.

**Zahara:** I think Rhiannon was right about Professor Sterling.

She responds a couple of minutes later.

**Rhiannon:** Which part? Him being a total creep or??

**Sanvi:** Technically, he did fit the profile. You don't think it's him, do you?

**Zahara:** I just have a bad feeling about him. Let's have dinner later. I'll explain when I see you x

Sanvi responds immediately.

**Sanvi:** I'll be there x

**Rhiannon:** Me too x Are you alright? Did he do something? Want me to come over to yours now?

I smile at the screen; I can picture her so vividly in this moment. Probably lying on her stomach on her bed with a million notebooks and papers around her, a beer in one hand, frowning at her phone, ready to throw on her boots and her big coat if I should so much as hint that I need her.

**Zahara:** Everything's okay, we'll see each other in a couple of hours.

**Rhiannon:** Can't wait x love ya

**Sanvi:** I'll book a table at The Sandman. Stay safe, ladies x love you

**Zahara:** Love you both x

I'm much calmer by the time the cab pulls up outside my apartment building. Glancing up, I see the soft light emanating from my windows. I smile and breathe a sigh of relief. Iakov kept his promise. He's there, and the only thing I want right now is to run right into his arms and wrap myself in the safety and warmth of him.

Iakov is here, and that means nothing bad can happen to me.



BUT OF COURSE, THERE are those moments in life, right? Those moments that stalk you like silent shadows, like ravens moving from tree to tree high above you, watching you. Waiting to happen.

I feel it just as I open the door to my apartment. Like a shadow falling over me or a weight over my chest. I enter my apartment and my steps falter. Everything looks the same as before. At the end of the corridor, I can see my living room, hazy with lamplight and candles. On the little antique table next to the front door, next to my moon-shaped key bowl and the framed photo of my family, is a single white rose.

The door closes behind me before I can turn around, and I hear the sound of the locks being turned.

“Good evening, my beautiful little historian.”

Take Control

## Zahara

IT'S STRANGE HOW FEAR can affect you, how differently it manifests. Sometimes, fear can feel so damaging, so foggy, so helpless. Sometimes it makes you nervous as a hare, every muscle tensed for flight.

But this time, my fear bypasses both those things. My fear clasps around me like a vice, hard as metal. Like armour.

I say, "Good evening, Professor Sterling."

My thoughts are fast in my head. My knife is in my coat pocket. If I take off my coat and leave it behind, I won't have my knife. Iakov's knife is in my bedroom, but my bedroom is where I don't want to end up right now. The only room with a lock is the bathroom, but the bathroom will offer no escape, only a holdout. A temporary one. My phone is in my bag. I can't possibly use it without Professor Sterling seeing me. My best bet is to hold the emergency call button while he's distracted.

Distract Professor Sterling. How hard could it be?

After all, he came here for me. And here I am.

"I didn't expect to see you here, Professor," I tell him.

I turn around slowly, head first, to cast him a look over my shoulder. He needs to think I'm surprised but not necessarily displeased. He needs to think I'm open to whatever he's come here for. And most importantly, he can't realise I'm scared.

Professor Sterling steps forward, away from the door. He's still wearing his coat and scarf. He must have beaten me by minutes. He seems completely calm, like everything is going according to plan.

"I know you didn't," he replies. He speaks gently, but there's an underlying tautness in his voice. It's not hard to guess he's not very happy with me. He adds, "You were probably expecting that thug of yours, weren't you?"

I give a little one-shoulder shrug. "He's been living with me, so yes. I suppose I did."

"Do you really think he's good enough for you?" Professor Sterling is now standing right in front of me. "Just because he's friends with your brother doesn't mean he's your equal. A mindless thug with no education—is that the best you deserve?"

*Iakov Kavinski is more than I deserve, I think. If God let me have Iakov, I would spend the rest of my life trying to deserve him.*

"You've got it all wrong, Professor," I say. I try to sound sweet and unthreatening. Men hate having their mistakes pointed out, especially by women. "Iakov is staying here as a favour for my brother. We're not in a relationship."

"Maybe not." He pushes a strand of my hair over my shoulder and smooths the collar of my coat. The gesture would be almost fatherly if his eyes weren't so crazed. "But you love him, don't you?"



“No,” I lie. “Of course not. I hate him.”

“For three years I’ve watched you, Zahara.” Professor Sterling wraps his hands around the lapels of my coat, bringing me closer to him. His breath smells a little sour, like stale coffee and hunger. “For three years I’ve watched you waste your love on men who don’t deserve you. I’ve always wondered why you never choose someone worthy. I think it’s because you think you’re not good enough. But you are, Zahara. You’re so beautiful.” His eyes are wide behind his glasses, and spittle flecks on his lip as he speaks. His voice is taut and raw. I find the knife in my pocket and wrap my fingers around it. “You don’t even know how beautiful you are, how perfect.”

Professor Sterling slides my coat off my shoulders. It falls, taking my bag with it. They land at my feet in a dull thud. I keep my eyes on Professor Sterling as his hands move up my neck, thumb rolling over my mouth.

“That face of yours, like a painting. Those eyes, so innocent, so sweet. Those lips. And that body...” His hands drop to my shoulders, to my waist. His eyes move over me like I’m meat. “You have a body created for a man’s pleasure, Zahara.” A shiver of disgust crawls down my back. “You’ve just never chosen the right man. But I’ve been waiting, I’ve been so patient with you...” His eyes are bulging slightly in their sockets, now shamelessly staring at my breasts underneath the fine wool jumper I’m wearing.

“If you liked me, Professor, why did you never say anything?”

He gives a little scoff, his eyes moving back up to mine.

“And risk frightening you? Having you report me? No, Zahara, the world doesn’t understand the love a man like me can have for a woman like you. I couldn’t risk it. I wanted to wait for you to understand, for you to be ready.”

There’s a frenetic intensity to his voice now, a shiver of excitement trembling in his words. He’s come here with a goal, and he’s working himself up towards it. I need to buy time.

“I wouldn’t have reported you,” I tell him. “I always had the biggest crush on you.”

“You did?” he asks with a sharp intake of breath. “Why did you never say?”

“Because I didn’t think you wanted me.”

“How could I not? How could any man not want you? God, look at that body of yours, those curves.”

He steps towards me with a groan, and I step back. My heart is beating so hard I’m scared he’ll hear it. All I can think of is to keep him distracted, distracted enough to keep his interest, but not let his urges get the better of him. I’m walking a tightrope; I just hope I’m not the first to fall.

“I thought if you wanted me, you would, I don’t know...” I give a little sigh, a girlish flourish to make him think I’m useless and vulnerable. “I thought you would *court* me.”

Professor Sterling grows still at the words.

“Court you?”

“The way you spoke about those Arthurian knights, the chivalric romance tradition. You always made me so nostalgic for it. Knights and their ladies. Lancelot and his Guinevere.”

“Lancelot...” he murmurs. “And his Guinevere. Yes...”

He takes my face in his hands and leans down. I crush my eyes closed, not wanting to see him. My entire body goes stiff and cold as ice as he kisses me.

And then my phone rings. Professor Sterling jumps, pulling away from me. My phone vibrates at our feet, where it still is in my bag. I catch my breath, torn between hope and terror. Professor Sterling bends down to reach into my bag.

As he does, I slip the knife I’ve kept squeezed in my palm into the waistband of my tights. I step back, heart hammering, as he pulls my phone out and looks at the screen.

Zachary.

Zachary and I only ever text or send voice notes or talk in person. Zach knows I hate phone calls. He would never call me.

“My brother,” I tell Professor Sterling.

“I know,” he says. He’s frowning, eyes flicking between the phone and me. “It’s not important—is it?”

He’s trying to work out whether it’s riskier for me to ignore the call or take it. So far, I’ve not rejected him or his advances.

He has no reason to think I would give him away.

I tell Professor Sterling the truth. “He never calls me... Maybe something happened to his girlfriend?”

Professor Sterling glances down. The picture of Zachary I have saved under his name is one of him and Theo, taken during the summer of their last year in Spearcrest. In the picture, Theo is looking at the camera, mouth open in a smile, and Zachary is looking at Theo the way he always does, like a saint looking at a god.

“Pick up,” Professor Sterling says. “Make it quick.”

I answer the call.

“Zaro—” Zachary’s voice is short. “Are you alright? Where’s Iakov?”

He knows Iakov’s not here.

How does he know? Where *is* Iakov?

“I have no idea,” I answer lightly, giving Professor Sterling a little shrug. “Not *here*.”

“Are you alone?” Zach asks.

“No.”

“Zaro, are you alright? Do you—”

“End the call,” Professor Sterling mouths, reaching for my phone.

“I love you, big bro.”

Professor Sterling hangs up before I can finish the words. He turns the phone off and lays it down on the side table. Then he picks up my coat and hangs it on one of the hooks. Takes off his own coat and scarf, places them next to mine. A disturbingly domestic charade.

“My Guinevere,” he says, turning back to me. “Do you know how long I’ve been waiting for this?”

And then he takes my hand and pulls, leading me to the door on the right side of the corridor. I stop, resisting him for the first time. “This isn’t my bedroom.”

“I know.” He smiles, opens the door, and pulls me through. “It’s *his* room. Oh, I know, Zahara.”

“How do you know?” This time, I can’t help myself from asking. “How did you know he wouldn’t be here tonight?”

Professor Sterling smiles. “Because unlike *him*, I know better than to let you out of my sight.”

I think about the marble bust he gave me for my birthday. Such an odd gift—if we weren’t both historians. It stayed in its box for a whole week before I felt guilty and took it out, placed it on the mantelpiece in the living room—with a perfect view on the flat.

“You’ve been watching me?” I ask in a whisper.

“Of course.” Professor Sterling wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me into Iakov’s room. “Isn’t that what knights do with their ladies? They wait, and watch. And then they consummate.”

He closes the door behind us.



IAKOV'S ROOM LOOKS THE same as ever. Weights stacked in one corner, bottles of vodka on the bedside table. The bed is barely made, the blanket hastily tossed over the mattress. An untidy pile of clothes fills the armchair in one corner, and a box of cigarettes is half-open on the chest of drawers.

Professor Sterling casts a disgusted look across the room and pulls me towards the bed.

“Why here?” I ask, and my throat is thick and heavy with disgust and terror. “My room is nicer.”

“Because *he* got to have you in your bed,” Sterling says, low and harsh as he takes off his glasses. He looks older than ever, and he looks angry, now. “So I’m going to have you in *his*.”

A cold wave washes over me, a hair-raising sensation of violation. My palms are slick with sweat, and my stomach twists with nausea.

“You have a camera in my room?” I ask. I’m no longer hiding the horror in my voice now.

“Oh yes, my Zahara. I know exactly what you’ve been up to.” Professor Sterling shrugs off his cardigan, loosens the top

buttons of his shirt. He's sweating, droplets dribbling down the sides of his face, and breathing hard. "I know exactly what kind of girl you are. How *bad* you've been. But all you young sluts are the same, with your short skirts and your innocent eyes. You all just want a real man to look after you, to take control of you."

He grabs my arms, hard this time, and pushes me back roughly. I land on Iakov's blanket, and a cloud of his scent rises to meet my nose. Cheap cologne, detergent, cigarettes and petrol. The smell of Iakov, of safety, and strength.

What was it Iakov wrote on the note?

*Roses have thorns to keep them safe. That's what makes them special.*

Professor Sterling lowers himself on top of me.

"Your father's never going to love you," he mutters in my ear. "But I will."

*Hurt the fuckers who want to hurt you.*

I slip my hand down and arch my body as I reach for my waistband. A look of satisfaction and triumph flashes across Sterling's face.

"Yes, beautiful, just like—"

And then I press the point of my knife under Professor Sterling's chin. He freezes, looking at me in shock.

"Get the fuck off me, you pathetic piece of *shit*."

Shock, because his fantasy is all wrong. He's not Lancelot and I'm not a lady from a chivalric romance. And I'm sick of being a damsel in distress.

I'm Zahara Blackwood, and I'm one thorny fucking rose.



Hellhound

## Iakov

THERE'S ONLY ONE PERSON left to see, in the end.

I stand at the foot of a beautiful Belgravia townhouse. It's as white as the falling snow. White as the smoke wreathing from my lips. A perfect white façade to hide the rotten black soul of a child murderer.

I'm as rotten inside as my father is. He's made sure, all these years, to infect me with his decay. Every person I beat half to death. Every broken bone, every bullet lodged in kneecaps. All the blood on my hands—everything I did. It's tainted every single part of me.

And I let it. I accepted the infection, I let my conscience grow as dark and heavy as a stormcloud. I did it thinking it served a purpose, that it would all be worth it. It *would* all have been worth it if I'd kept Lena safe.

The years I spent doing favours for Danyl Stepanovich, working to make my way back to Lena. The bastard led me to my sister after all, but not the one I left behind.

*See?* The dead woman whispers to me from the darkness. *You should have come with me. All those years ago. You should have stayed in the lake and come with me.*

*If you had died, that night in Yalinka, the night of your first Blood Moon, none of this would have happened.*

*Your father would never have come to get you from your mother's house. You wouldn't have been there to fight him. Lena would still be alive.*

Another voice rings in my mind, drowning out the dead woman's whispers. A steady voice, full of intelligence and sophistication.

*If you had died that night, we would never have met,* says the voice of Zachary Blackwood. *You would never have spent Christmases with Theo and me. We would never have gotten drunk and danced and laughed together.*

*You would never have met Zahara.*

And then I hear Zahara's voice.

*You have to live. I command it. Live until I allow you to die.*

"Yes, Kolyuchka," I whisper.

I throw my cigarette into the snow. It sizzles and goes out. Punching my hands into my pockets, I climb the steps into the door and enter my father's house for the last time.



A HOUSEKEEPER GREETES ME. A woman in her early thirties, in a clean uniform, hair tied back. I watch her as she draws near me. Is this what my mother looked like before she had me, back when she was working for my father?

Is my vile monster of a father doing the same thing to this woman as he did to my mother?

“Leave,” I tell the woman. “This place isn’t safe for you. Go get your things and leave *now*.”

Her eyes widen, but maybe she knows the kind of man my father is, because it only takes her a few minutes to do exactly as I tell her. I shut the door behind her and make my way through the house. The rooms are straight out of a catalogue. Everything is clean and barren.

It’s late in the evening now, so I make my way upstairs into the bedrooms. My father never goes anywhere without his security detail, but if he sent Anton away, then he must be alone.

But even if he is, I have no doubt there’s a guard somewhere with a room full of screens just like Luca’s, and he’s going to realise my father is no longer alone.

If I’m going to do this, I’m going to need to do it fast.

My father is the kind of man you can only take a shot at once.

You miss and you’re done.

Better not miss.



IT'S THE SMELL OF cigarettes that leads me to him. The double doors are wide open, and my father sits in the centre of the room, on a low couch, in pyjamas and a fancy black dressing gown with gold piping. A glass of brown liquor sweats on top of its coaster on the glass coffee table. He's got a pile of newspapers next to him on the couch, and one open in front of him.

He looks up when I enter the room and takes the time to fold away his newspaper before setting it aside. Cigarette balanced between two fingers, he picks up his glass and takes a sip.

“You come without being called now, mutt?” he says. He points to the newspapers at his side. “Your journalists have been quiet, it seems. Have you finally done what you're told? Maybe you're not useless after all.”

I look around the room. I'm certain he doesn't have cameras in here—I'm sure plenty of shit happens here that he wouldn't want records of. But there were cameras downstairs, and the housekeeper might even have warned someone on her way out. I don't know. The house is still quiet.

My father's bedroom is grand; he probably needs to be reminded of how powerful he is even when he's in pyjamas. His phones are lined up on a desk next to some folders. His gun rests in its holster on a bedside table.

*One* of his guns, anyway.

“You think I have a reason to do what I'm told?” I ask him, throwing him a look over my shoulder.

His eyes follow my movement, his gaze jumping from his gun back to me. He watches me as I walk to the bedside table, take the gun, pull it out of the holster, test its weight. He doesn't flinch or stand or reach for whatever weapon he's got close at hand.

"I know you have a reason," he says. "You have plenty."

I turn and walk into the centre of the room. There are two armchairs facing the couch across the glass table. I lower myself into one of them and lean forward to rest my elbows on my knees. His gun dangles from my hand. He doesn't look at it. He takes a sip of his drink and looks straight into my eyes.

"You must be really fucking angry or really fucking stupid," he says, "to show up here tonight."

"Probably both. Must have inherited my anger issues and stupidity from you, old man."

"It's the only thing you'll ever inherit, you worthless piece of shit," he sneers. "I could have given you the world, you know that? I could have given you the world on a fucking plate. If you only ever learned to keep your mouth shut and your head down."

"When you train your beast with a reward and a stick," I tell him, "you better pray your stick doesn't break and your reward doesn't turn out to be a lie."

He curls a lip in disdain. "My prayers are never about you, mutt."

“No, you have more important things to pray about. But I don’t think God is going to let a child murderer into heaven.”

He lets out a sharp breath, almost a laugh. He sits back, crossing his ankles.

“Ah,” he says. “Is that what you want to talk about?”

I look at him. He’s stocky, strong for his age. If I barrelled into him, he would probably put up a good fight. He’ll have to. I have no intention of using his gun on him. He doesn’t deserve the cold, clean execution of a bullet to the skull.

He deserves to be torn apart limb from limb.

His eyes are the same eyes I see when I look in the mirror. That narrow, tapered shape, the irises so dark they are almost black. Even now he doesn’t have the decency—the humanity—to flinch or look away.

“Yelena would have made you weak,” he says finally. “So will that spoilt little rich girl you think you love. Don’t you fucking get it, mutt? Your Lena had to die for you to become the man you’re going to be.”

“The death of a child? My little sister?” My voice comes out dull. “You’re gonna justify killing a little girl by telling me it’s for my own good?”

He shakes his head. “It’s not my fault you’re too fucking stupid to understand the world we live in.”

“And what did you think was going to happen when I found out?” I ask, standing. “Go on, old man. You’re so fucking smart. In this world we live in—now I know you killed my

little sister in cold blood and then dangled her life in front of my face for a decade—what happens now?”

My father’s eyes follow mine as I stand. He doesn’t look at the gun. He gives a lazy shrug. Arrogance drips from him like seething bile.

“You’re not going to kill me,” he says.

I let out a bark of laughter. “No?”

“No. You’re not going to kill me. Your sister is dead—yes. So what? Your sister’s been dead for a long fucking time. It’s never stopped you living your life. And now you know she’s dead—so what? You think that’s going to change anything? You’re not going to kill me because even with Lena gone, you have too much to lose. I plucked you out of the dirt—out of the fucking dirt at my feet—and I gave you this life. You think you would be friends with British nobility and billionaires if it wasn’t for me? You think you’d be fucking your little rich bitch if it wasn’t for me? I took you out of your miserable fucking existence and put you into mine, into the world of *winners*. You think you’ll get anything if I die? You think you’ll get a fucking penny?”

“I don’t want any of it.” I kick the glass table out of the way. It tips and falls shattering to the ground. I stand right in front of my father, forcing him to look up at me. “I *never* wanted any of it. All this money you’re never gonna use, all these people who only obey out of fear, or because they want shit from you. I don’t want any of that. You didn’t bring me into the world of winners. You brought me into the world of



*money*. But money doesn't mean shit if you don't need it to be happy.”

He tries to speak, but this time I shut him up, kicking him back and pinning him to the back of the couch with my boot.

“I didn't want this fucking life. I didn't want it then and I don't want it now. I would give up every fucking penny in every single one of your bank accounts just for the chance to go back, to live a normal life, to work a shitty job in Yalinka and look after my mother and watch my sister grow up. It's the only thing I ever wanted, and you took it from me.”

I point the gun at my father's head.

This time he flinches.

“You don't deserve a bullet. A bullet is what I would give an animal to put it out of its misery. A bullet is humane. But I'm a fucking dog, remember?”

I toss aside the gun, grab him by the collar of his shirt and punch his face as hard as I can. Hard enough to feel every muscle in my arm and shoulder ripple at the impact. He falls aside and pushes himself away from the couch and up onto his feet. He cups his nose, which is already pouring blood.

“You think your sister would've had a good life?” he spits out. His eyes are full of hatred. “She would've just grown up to be like her mother. Low-class life, low-class bitch. Spreading her legs for any man who could slip money into her pocket. You fucking bastard, you think—”

I run headlong into him, sending us both crashing into the floor. He tries to roll away, but I pin him under me. I punch his face until he's spurting out mouthfuls of phlegm and blood. I wrap my hand around his neck and squeeze. He grows still and then laughs in a gurgle.

“Make sure you kill me, mutt. Because if you don't, I'll destroy everything you hold dear in this world, starting with the Blackwood girl.”

I squeeze harder, my mind a whirlwind, a void, a chaos. Something hard pushes into my shoulder, and I don't register it straight away.

Then there's a gunshot. An explosion of noise; an explosion of pain.

The impact sends me reeling back. The pain screams out from the wound, spreads through my entire torso, like I've been shot all over instead of in one place. My arm falls numb at my side.

My father scrambles to his feet as I crawl upright and kicks into my face hard. The pain is a drop in an ocean. With a hiss of breath, I roll away from him. With my good arm, I grope around for the gun I discarded earlier. I'm going to need it.

My father's foot comes down on me as my fingers wrap around cold metal. He kicks me back, and I land on the pool of broken glass from the shattered table. This time, the pain doesn't even register. My father pushes his bare foot into my shoulder, right over the bullet wound, which is now gushing

blood thick and slick as crimson oil. He pushes; he pushes hard.

I look up. His gun—the small one, the one he always keeps near him, is clutched in his hand. It's pointing straight at my face.

“It's what you've always wanted, isn't it?” my father says through a mouthful of blood. “To die. I'll give you your death, mutt, if you don't drop that gun.”

My fingers tighten around the grip. I raise the gun, mirroring his gesture, and point it at his face.

“If I'm going to hell, old man,” I tell him, “I'm taking you with me.”

And then a voice rings out, hard and clear, just as I'm about to squeeze the trigger.

“Patsan. *Don't.*”

Strong Enough

## Zahara

I PUSH THE KNIFE, and Professor Sterling moves with it. I crawl out from under him and leap to my feet. My legs are shaking, but my hand is steady around the knife. The metal handle moulds to my palm, an anchor, a tether.

Through it, I feel Iakov.

Iakov, who didn't just want to keep me safe, but who wanted me to keep *myself* safe.

*You're strong enough, Kolyuchka*, he would say while training me. *Stronger than you think.*

The only man who ever looked at me and saw strength.

Professor Sterling steps carefully back, hands up like I'm pointing a gun at him. His eyes are on me, and his mouth is twisted in a strange grimace. An expression of disappointment—not fear.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," he says in a hushed tone, like a secret.

"No?" I back up towards the door. My eyes stay on his, my arm doesn't drop an inch as I grope for the doorway. "This isn't part of your fantasy, is it? Girls are only attractive so long as they're at your mercy, right?"

"Zahara, you don't understand, you're confused." He tries to take a step forward, but I jab sharply in the direction of his neck, forcing him to retreat. "I don't want you at my mercy.

I'm not like all those other men. I want to keep you safe, to look after y—”

“I'll keep myself safe,” I tell him. “So you don't need to worry about me any longer, Professor.”

“You think you know everything,” Sterling says in a rueful tone. He shakes his head. “You're so young Zahara, you think you understand how the world works but you do—”

“Professor, I want you to leave. Now. Nothing bad has to happen if you just walk out.”

He gives me a searching look, maybe trying to work out how sincere I'm being, or how far I'm willing to go if he doesn't obey. I choose to clarify.

“I don't want to hurt you, but I will.” I look him dead in his eyes as I speak. Even if he thinks I'm bluffing, he'll know my intent in my eyes. The hatred and terror and fury writhing inside me isn't something he can miss.

“Alright. Alright.” He sighs and follows me slowly out of Iakov's room, hands still up. “I understand—I frightened you. It's all happening too fast. I'm sorry, Zahara, I wanted to do this properly, but I couldn't stand the thought of that boy putting his hands on you, touching what was mine.”

A shudder of disgust claws through me. I tighten my hand on the knife.

“Turn around, Professor. Walk to the door. Slowly.”

He obeys. I follow him down the corridor, far enough that he can't turn around and knock into my arm if he wants. At the

door, he pauses.

“Open it,” I snap. “Get out. Now.”

He pulls the door open. The lights from the hall fall in a pale column across the darkened corridor. If I can only get him out of the door and lock it after him, then I’ll be able to call Zach, call the police, call anyone I can think of. I’ll be safe. I’ll be okay. And then I can help Iakov.

Sterling stands in the doorway and turns back to me.

“My coat and scarf?”

“I’ll have it sent to your office. *Go.*”

He lets out a heavy sigh, a noise like he’s resolving himself.

“Very well. For what it’s worth, Zahara, I’m sorry.”

And then he walks out of my flat.

I nod and step slowly to the door. He watches me with an expression like a child that’s had a toy taken from them. When I reach the door, I close it on his face. My heart is in my mouth as I move my free hand towards the lock.

I’m so *close*.

And then the door explodes open, crashing into my face. The impact sends my head knocking into the wall behind the door like a ricochet. Shock and pain burst through my face and I stumble back.

Professor Sterling falls on me like a vulture.



NO DELICACY THIS TIME. No seduction, no wheedling, no explanations. Sterling wraps his arm around my neck, dragging me in a chokehold away from the door. He kicks it shut behind us. I barely have time to register that he's only had time to slam the latch shut before he drags me into the living room.

I slash at his arm with the knife and smell blood. He lets out a yell, turns right and slams me into the marble top of the kitchen island. The air is crushed out of my lungs in a guttural grunt. Sterling takes my arm—the one holding the knife—and bangs it into the sharp edge of the counter.

I hold on to the knife the first two times. On the third, the blow is so hard and jarring, my fingers jerk open. I don't see the knife fall; I hear only the clatter.

“You stupid girl,” Professor Sterling hisses in my ear. “You actually thought you were going to save yourself? You're not some heroine and this isn't your story. The one person who could keep you safe is gone—you really think you could do this alone?”

He's wrong. I *can* do this alone, I have to—because Iakov isn't here, and that means he's in danger. This time, *Iakov* needs *me*.



I shove myself off the countertop with all my strength, throwing us both back. We go flying across the living room. Sterling recovers first, grabbing me by my leg. I kick into his arm, right over the bloody gash I made, and scramble back, slamming my shoulder painfully into the side of an armchair. Professor Sterling rushes me, hauls me up by my hair, throws me back onto the couch.

What was it Iakov told me?

*If you can't fight, run.*

*If you can fight, run.*

*If you can't run, give everything you have. Use your elbows, your knees, your nails, your teeth.*

*Buy yourself the time you need to run.*

*And then run.*

I kick up straight into Professor Sterling's crotch. He leaps back with a yelp, tripping into a side table. He falls, bringing plants and vases and candles crashing with him. I climb over the side of the couch and run. He catches me almost at the door, drags me back, throws me into the wall. My side lands against a cabinet corner. I reach out to right myself.

"You're not getting away!" Sterling is hysterical now, his voice high and straining, his eyes bulging. "*You're mine!*"

He pulls me with him by my top, and it rips in his grip. Terror blazes through me. He throws himself on top of me to stop me from crawling away. I scream as he wraps his hands around my throat.

“They all got to have you,” he pants out. “Why shouldn’t I? Why shouldn’t I?”

He squeezes. My face is a pulsing heartbeat of pain. Blood is dribbling down into my mouth, and I spit it into his face. I reach up and I scratch him, hard as I can, digging my fingernails into his eyes. He lets out a roar of anger and slams my head down.

Stars flare across my vision. I blink quickly, trying to clear my eyes. Everything around us is wavering, growing brighter. An acrid smell fills my lungs. My mouth opens wide, desperately trying to suck in air.

All I taste is smoke.

A crashing sound startles Sterling and he looks up as the curtains, now veils of flames, collapse with their wooden rods in a shower of sparks.

“Fuck!” Sterling yells.

In that single moment of distraction, his fingers loosen just enough for me to hiss in a burning breath. I reach for the closest thing at hand—a book. A big, heavy book. I wrap my fingers around it.

And then I slam the corner into the side of his head.

He drops to the side with a wail. I scramble back, kicking him in the face with my heel. I don’t even turn to look back at the flames spreading through the room, I obey the single command blaring in my skull.

*Run.*



STERLING'S FOOTSTEPS AND GRUNTS follow me all the way to the door. I wrench open the latch just as he reaches me. He pulls me back by my hair and I turn and throw my open palm over his ear, hard as I can. I'm so close—I'm too close.

I refuse. This time, I refuse. I refuse to let him drag me back. I slam my knee into his groin and he collapses with a yell. I turn and throw the door open and I run out.

And I slam straight into a body. Arms wrap around me, lift me, spin me away from the door. Around us, men in uniforms rush past us, burying themselves through the open doorway.

I look up, and my entire body grows limp.

I try to speak, but my voice, damaged by smoke and the bruises around my neck, is the tatters of a whisper.

“Dad...”

And my father, who's here somehow, who's here like I'm dreaming him up, whose solemn face is alive with sorrow and relief, wraps himself around me, and holds me tight, and cradles my head like I'm a child as I burst into tears against his chest.

“I'm here. My Zahara, my darling, my love. You're alright, you're safe. I'm here, and everything's going to be alright. I'm

so sorry, my darling girl. I'm here. I'm here.”

Ending It

## **Iakov**

ANTON WALKS SLOWLY INTO the room. His black eyes survey the scene, cold and calculating. His gun is pointed at me.

“Pavel,” he says. “Step away from the boy. I need to look at the wound.”

My father steps back, not without one final kick to my shoulder. The pain is unbelievable—even my good arm is weak, the gun trembling in my livid fingers.

“Iakov. Lower your gun,” Anton says as he crosses over to me.

I watch his shiny shoes crunch over broken glass, as he draws close and kneels at my side to inspect my shoulder.

How many times have we lived this exact same moment?

Me, injured by my father, and Anton at my side, a grim expression on his face. That mix of pity and disapproval.

*Why do you do this to yourself, patsan? Why do you make him hurt you?*

*You could have it easy. You can have it good.*

He doesn't say any of it this time. Instead, he looks up at my father. He's shaking too, the old man, and his gun is still in his hand.

“You shot him in the shoulder, Pavel?”

My father lets out a scornful snort. “Stop being such a soft-hearted son-of-a-bitch, Anton. I missed his arteries. He’ll be fine.”

Anton presses a palm to my shoulder, sending a bolt of pain through me.

“Can you feel your arm?”

I try to move my fingers. The pain is like a hungry black pit, swallowing everything. I can’t tell what I feel because all I feel is pain.

“I don’t know,” I say. “Help me up.”

Anton helps me sit up but stops me before I can stand.

“Give me your gun,” he says.

I meet his eyes. His face—that mindfuck. So similar to the man I’m trying to kill. And so different too. I’ve never seen pity on my father’s face.

But it’s plastered over every inch of Anton’s.

“No,” I rasp out. “No, Anton. I’m sorry.”

“Give it to me. He’s not going to kill you.” Anton glances over his shoulder. “Are you, Pavel?”

“I’ll put him down like the fucking dog he is,” my father spits, raising his gun to me once more.

Anton doesn’t even flinch. His eyes slide away from my father like he’s a child holding a toy.

“He’s not going to kill you. He can’t.”

“*Anton.*” My father speaks his name like a warning.

“This shit has gone on too long, Pavel,” Anton says without turning. “It’s the worst-kept secret in Russia. He probably already knows.” He jerks his head at me. “You’re his only son, Iakov. You know that?”

I let out a laugh that sounds more like a groan. “C’mon, dedushka. That old man and his dirty dick?”

My father steps forward to ram the muzzle of his gun into my temple. Anton pushes it away with a dismissive sweep of his palm.

“Andrei’s dead.”

I push Anton away and push myself painfully to my feet. “Liar.”

Anton stands back but continues speaking. “He committed suicide five years ago.”

“*Anton—what the fuck are you doing?*” my father bellows.

“He’s not going to kill you,” Anton tells me. “If you die, then his legacy will die with him. He’ll never let that happen—will you, Pavel? You can cover up a dead son but you can’t bring him back.” And now Anton finally turns. His gun follows his line of sight, pointing straight at my father. “So put the guns down. Both of you. Now.”

My father’s face is red, veins pulsing at his temples as he stares at Anton. “What are—”

“*Now, Pavel. Iakov, you too. Guns down.*”



I throw the gun aside. My father holds on to his for a second longer and then does the same. Anton kicks both of them away.

“Why are you doing this?” my father asks.

He’s not even looking at me now. Anton has the full force of his focus. Anton, my father’s right-hand man, used to remind me of a shadow. Standing silently behind my father, a dark copy to do his bidding.

But right now, with Anton in his clean suit and black coat and my father in his blood-soaked pyjamas and sweat-streaked face, the image is inverted.

Now, it’s my father who seems like Anton’s shadow.

“You told me you’d never hurt the girl,” Anton says softly.

My father lets out a grotesque cackle of laughter. “This is why you’re doing this? A lifetime of service—everything you’ve worked for. You stupid, sentimental bastard. You’re gonna throw it all away because of a dead girl?”

Anton’s entire body is straight and relaxed. His face is carefully blank. But his fingers around the gun are firm. I know Anton well. If he wanted to, he could pull the trigger before I could even blink, without so much as a tremor of hesitation.

I’ve seen him do it before.

“She was the same age as my Natalya is right now,” Anton says. His voice is soft, almost thoughtful. “You know I can

still remember her face? The opposite of his. Those blue eyes. She was so scared.”

My eyes burn. I don't realise I'm crying until I feel warm tears rolling down my cheeks.

My father, though, scoffs like Anton's said something pathetic, something ridiculous.

“So fucking what? You're growing a conscience now? Come on. Since when do you give a fuck about the people we've killed?”

“Not *children*, Pavel.”

“What difference does it fucking make? I was a child once and so were you. All children grow up. What does it matter? When have we ever drawn lines? A life is a life, Anton. You're a murderer, same as me. You've put more people in the ground than anyone I know. Now you're going to look down because I killed a little girl? So fucking what? I did what I had to do to bring the boy to heel.”

Now it's Anton's turn to let out an ugly burst of laughter.

“When have you ever brought him to heel? You've tried to break him every way you could. For what? Where has it gotten you? Your first son killed himself. Now you have one son left, and he hates your guts. An heir who wants you dead. Is that why the girl had to die? So that you could fuck it all up?”

“I made him *strong!*” my father bellows. “I made him a *man!*”

“You fucking *broke* him,” Anton replies. “You made him into an animal. A dog who lives in a hole, who believes he’s not good for anything but dying. That’s not a man, Pavel. That’s a fucking tragedy.”

“You’ll thank me one day,” my father barks, turning to look at me. I don’t flinch. His words wash over me. “You’ll thank me on your fucking knees one day. You’ll see. When you have everything you want and nothing to lose. Then you’ll see.”

“You can’t give me the things I want,” I tell him.

I feel oddly calm. Maybe it’s the blood loss, or the mind-numbing pain, or the adrenaline crash of thinking I was about to die. Maybe it’s just Anton’s solid presence at my side. My not-father.

Maybe it’s because I know what’s going to happen.

My father sneers. “What can you possibly want I can’t give you?”

“Normal shit,” I tell him. “It’s the only thing I ever wanted. Normal shit. Happiness. A clean conscience. A wife I love. Good friends, a good life. That’s all.”

My father looks at me, stunned into silence. And then his shoulders drop, and he shakes his head.

“You pathetic fool. You’re no son of mine.” He looks sharply back at Anton and raises his hand in a demanding gesture. “Enough of this shit. Anton. Put your gun away and get the boy out of here. I don’t want to see either of you right now. Fucking pathetic—both of you. Normal shit and dead

children? You pussies. Everything I have, everything I achieved. You think I'm going to stay awake at night thinking about one dead girl?" He shakes his head once more and snaps his bloody fingers at Anton. "Enough. Get the fuck out of here before I put a bullet in your head."

Anton watches him. He seems utterly calm—and I know my father's afraid. I've seen Anton's face when he's about to commit an execution; so has my father.

"Don't fuck everything up," he tells Anton. "Everything you have. Your houses, your cars. Your life. Your wife and children. Isn't that what matters? Why would you give it all up for this? For this feral kid and his dead sister? Why—"

Anton lowers his gun. My father smiles. Anton hands me his gun by the grip. I take it in my good hand, looking up at Anton's face.

He nods.

"Your revenge, Yasha. Your revenge, my gun."

I swallow hard. Tears run freely down my face.

"You're a good kid," Anton says. "I would have been proud to be your father. Let's end this."

So we end it.



MY FATHER IS SLUMPED on the couch, half-fallen into the pile of newspapers he was reading when I first came. That feels like hours ago. Years ago.

A lifetime ago.

His death was quick, in the end. A single bullet, the recoil of it still vibrating in my arm. I stare at his lifeless face. I thought it would feel so much better than this. I thought I would feel like an invisible chain had been lifted off me.

But it doesn't.

I don't feel avenged, or relieved, or satisfied.

I don't feel anything.

The blood's still leaking out of my shoulder. It drips down my useless arms, my listless fingers. I stand and teeter and the black void in my chest gapes wide.

*I can feel how tired you are, boy.* The dead woman's voice is gentler than it's ever been. *You've been fighting for a long time. The fighting's done. Don't you want to rest?*

"Yes."

I don't even realise I've said it out loud until Anton turns to me. He wraps a hand around my neck and forces me to look down at him.

"Patsan. Give me the gun."

I hand it to him. He takes it out of my limp fingers. I'm covered in sweat. My heart is a dull thump, tediously repetitive.

Anton presses his hand into my neck. “You need to get out of here, son. Now, you understand? There’s going to be police here soon. I want you gone when they get here.”

“I did it, dedushka,” I say. My voice is hoarse like I’ve been screaming for hours. “I killed him.”

“I know. You had to. It’s done now.” He lets go of me and begins to clean the grip of his gun. “*My* bullet—*my* gun. That’s all. I’ll deal with the CCTV footage. I’ll deal with the body. I’ll deal with the police. But you can’t be here when they get here.” He takes my face in his hand, roughly, almost shaking me. “Tell me you understand.”

“I understand.”

“Good. Now get the fuck out of here. I have shit to do, and you need to sort your shoulder out. You don’t wanna lose your arm, patsan. You’re already so damn ugly, your girlfriend will dump you if you’re missing an arm to boot.”

I don’t even have the energy to laugh. He turns me around and pushes me to the door.

“Go. Now. There’s going to be a lot of tomorrows. I’ll catch you on one of them.”

I nod again. I can’t do anything but nod. I nod and nod and listen to Anton and I don’t even have the voice, the strength, to thank him.

For raising me, in his own rough way. For looking after me. For defending me. For loving me. For letting me avenge Lena.

“Anton,” I say outside the room.

“What?”

“I love you, man.”

He rolls his eyes.

He says, “Get the fuck out of here and get your head seen to along with your shoulder.”

And, “I love you too, Yasha.”



I STUMBLE DOWN THE steps of the white townhouse and find myself on a blanket of snow. It shocks me. I forgot it was snowing.

For a second, I can do nothing but stare at the spinning snowflakes. They change colours as they fall. Blue in the shadows, gold and silver near the streetlamps, white when they hit the ground.

I try to gather my thoughts. Leave before police get here. Find Luca’s car. Fix my arm.

Return to Zahara. I swore to her I would be there when she got home. She might never forgive me. She might be in danger.

I’ve already failed Lena—I can’t fail Zahara.

But my entire body is shaking now. My knees buckle. Cold sweat streams over my skin. I manage only three steps before my legs give out and I keel forward into the snow.

I drag myself up onto my knees, sit back.

The snow is so white. So why is everything black?

*Enough, boy, enough.* The dead woman's fingers reach for me. They're not as gaunt and pale as I remember. Her face, from the shadows, is almost kind. She smiles at me. *You've had enough, poor boy. You've been so strong, but you've had enough. You're ready. Isn't that what you've always wanted?*

But another voice calls, drowning hers out.

A smoky voice, rough as a string of thorns. It calls my name, over and over. It tells me I'm not allowed to die. It's full of despair and authority.

I turn away from the dead woman's reaching fingers and see Zahara Blackwood haloed with gold, haloed with light. The Blackwood siblings are made from angelic stock. And Zahara, it would seem, is my angel of death.

I fall with a smile on my face, and let the darkness swallow me.



# BOOK FIVE



*A Hungry Wolf  
is Stronger  
than  
a Well-fed  
Dog*



# A Good Man

## Zahara

MY FATHER DOESN'T LET go of me for a long time.

Not while his private security run in to grab Professor Sterling. Not while we wait for the police and firemen. He keeps his arm firmly around me when he leads me down the stairs and out of my apartment building. Already, some journalists are gathering. He pushes past them, saying nothing, and escorts me to the black SUV waiting for us.

Inside, he shrugs off his coat and removes his tailored wool blazer before handing it to me. I take it in silence, peel off my torn top, and wrap myself into the blazer. It smells like my father, the oud-rich, spicy perfume he always wears.

He brushes my hair away from my neck and tilts his head to give it a quick look. Then he calls out to his driver, "Wolston. Take us to St Augustine."

"Dad—it's alright, I don't need the hospital. I'm fine."

He shakes his head, rolling up his sleeves slowly. It's what he does when he's tense, when he's trying to handle a problem.

"It won't hurt to have a doctor look at you," he says. And then he drops his head into his hands. Something I've never seen him do. "I can't believe what's happened. My darling girl, I'm—" He interrupts himself, holds up his hand and looks at it in surprise. "I'm shaking."

He is. I take his hand and squeeze it. My throat aches, not just from the bruising, but because there are years' worth of sobs gathering there.

"I can't believe you're here," I tell him. My voice fades halfway through the sentence.

"Of course I'm here. I'll always come if you need me. Zahara—you're my daughter. My youngest child, my only daughter. There's nothing in this world more precious to me than you."

"Even after—" I can't bring myself to bring up St Agnes.

"Nothing you've ever done could make me love you less. Nothing you could do ever would."

My vision blurs, and the tears, overflowing my eyes, fall down my cheeks in hot rivulets. "I know I've disappointed you. I know what I've done, Dad. I've been far from the perfect daughter and—"

"I'm not disappointed in you. I was angry about what happened in St Agnes—of course I was. How could I not be? I sent you away to keep you safe and instead just left you at the mercy of another predator. If I was disappointed, it was at myself, not at you. I failed as your father, the man who ought to protect you, and since then it's been failure after failure." His face, normally so solemn and statuesque, is drawn. For the first time, he seems tired, stressed, wretched. "My own daughter has become a stranger to me. What kind of a father does that make me?"

I throw my arms around his neck and squeeze myself against his side, like a child. I speak against his temple, my lips wet with tears.

“I’m sorry too. I couldn’t bear the thought of disappointing you again, of—” I stop and pull back. “How did you even know to come?”

He wipes his hand across his eyes. “Your brother, of course. He called me earlier. He sounded so afraid I could hardly bear it. He told me something happened to the Kavinski boy—that he was supposed to look after you, that he thought you were in danger. He told me your friends got in touch with him too, told him you hadn’t turned up for some dinner plans. He called me immediately. I was already in London, but he’s coming from Oxford and he feared he would be too late. So I came—of course, I came.”

He stops. His eyes are shot through with veins, the waterlines red, the eyelashes wet.

“I would come even if you were drunk at a party and simply needed to be dropped home. I would come even if you had too many shopping bags to carry and needed a helping hand. I love you. You are my world. I will always come for you.”

His words melt into my skin, into my heart. Of course, I’ve wanted to hear these words for so long. All I ever wanted was to know my father loved me.

And no matter how good I imagined it would feel, to finally hear him say all this, it still feels infinitely *better*.



I REFUSE TO GO to St Augustine until we've called Zachary. He answers with his voice tight and lets out a shuddering sigh of relief when he hears my voice.

“Zaro—what happened—are you alright?”

“I'm fine, Zach. I'm with Dad. Thank you for calling him. I'm safe. But I need to know where Iakov is. I think he's in trouble.”

“I—I don't know, I've no idea. I've tried calling him all night. He's not responding. Do you think—”

“How did you know he wasn't home?”

“A... a friend from Spearcrest told me. Said he might be in some sort of trouble. Luca. Luca Fletcher-Lowe.”

“Send me his number. I'll call you back as soon as I can.”

He sends me the number and I dial it immediately. My father doesn't question me. He watches me with his solemn eyes, sleeves rolled up, fingers laced together. I squeeze my fingers against the too-long hems of his blazer sleeves, willing Luca Fletcher-Lowe to answer his phone.

He does after a couple of rings.

“Good evening, Lord Blackwood.”

My father's eyes widen in surprise. His number isn't exactly public record.

"Where's Iakov?" I ask without preamble.

"Ah." A dry laugh crackles over the phone. "Not the duke, then. Good evening, Zahara. I trust you're well?"

"Do you know where he is—yes or no?"

"Probably in Belgravia, since he commandeered one of my cars to get there."

"Belgravia?" I exchange a frown with my father.

Another dry laugh from the other side of the phone. "His father's humble little London pied-a-terre."

"His father," I whisper.

"You should probably hurry and get him," Luca says, dark amusement in his voice. "His father is a bit of a cunt."

"Send me the address."

"Hm... very well. But tell Kav he owes me yet another favour. Oh, and tell him he'd better move my car. He left it parked on double red lines, and I hate having to deal with the petty bureaucratic tyranny of London civil enforcement officers. If he's still alive, that is. If Kav is dead, well... we'll call it quits, I suppose."

And with a languid sigh, he hangs up.





THE SNOW IS FALLING thick and fast by the time we get to Belgravia. A thick white blanket covers the pavements, the red letterboxes, the tree boxes. My father's car streams through the spinning drifts of snowflakes. We sit in silence, too tense to speak, but the entire time, my father keeps my hand squeezed in his.

In my mind, there's space for nothing but the memory of Iakov when he came home after going missing. His face a swollen mess of purpled contusions, one eye barely visible through the bruises, skin taut and shiny where it was filled with blood. His body, the lacerations on his back like he's been whipped.

If that's how he looked the last time he saw his father, how is he going to look now?

Why does that man hate Iakov so much? Iakov, whose entire life seems to be spent in his service? How could he hate his own son so much—how could he hurt his own son the way he does?

And how far would he go?

My father squeezes my fingers, and I turn to look at him. A throbbing pain is radiating in my neck, and my throat is sore

like I have the worst flu of my life. My entire body aches and I realise I'm shaking.

But not from the pain.

"Everything's going to be alright," my father says. His voice is quiet but determined. His eyebrows are drawn, his jaw is set. "Zahara. Everything's going to be alright."

"How do you know?" I ask him.

My voice is barely above a whisper now, like it barely has the strength to pass through my aching throat.

"Because I've met the young Mr Kavinski—on several occasions. And he has always struck me as the kind of young man who can take care of himself. Himself—and others. A strong man, a good man." The corner of his mouth lifts slightly, pushing into his beard. "The kind of young man I would be proud to call a son."

"*Dad*," I say, and although I meant to say it reproachfully, the pain in my heart is so sharp it breaks my voice in half. Tears bloom in my eyes, hot and blinding. I blink them away and wipe my eyes hard. "Don't make me cry. I have to be strong."

*I have to be strong for him.*

*He would be strong for me.*

The car slides to a stop and I throw the door open before the driver even has time to unbuckle his seatbelt. My father calls after me, but I'm already running, feet sinking in the fresh-fallen snow. The street is empty and ghostly white.

“Iakov!” I call, pushing my voice through the pain in a hoarse shout. “Iakov!”

I feel his presence before I can spot him. I don’t know how. But I feel something—a warmth, a pull—that makes me turn. A dark figure lumbers through the snow. Iakov.

His big body is folded in on itself. His long legs buckle, and he stumbles forward in the snow. I shout his name, and I run. He looks up, and his dark eyes find mine, and there’s an expression like faraway surprise in his eyes.

Relief floods through me like water breaking through a dam. It knocks me almost off my feet, but I keep going.

“Iakov!”

I reach him just as he keels forward. A gasp rips from my chest and I throw my arms out to catch him. He crumbles, sending us both crashing into the snow.

He smells like sweat and smoke and blood. He lies utterly still, and I tighten my arms, holding him as tight as I can, holding him like I’m trying to engulf him into my ribcage and swallow him in my very heart.

I hold him like I can never let go of him ever again.

Together

## Iakov

I DREAM, AND IN my dream, I see the dead woman from the lake.

Except she's not dead, this time. She stands in a field of grass, wearing an old dress and a soft cardigan over it. Her hands don't reach for me. They rest, veined and worn, on her arms. Her face is wrinkled and stern.

"You've made your choice, boy," she says.

"I'm sorry," I tell her.

Except that it's not me speaking.

It's a scrawny eleven-year-old boy with dark hair and sharp black eyes. A boy who would rather run than fight, a boy who dreams of making enough money to buy his sister a watercolour set.

"Don't be sorry," she says. "Our choices are ours to make. I made mine once. Now you've made yours." She sighs and waves a hand. "Bah, you would've made a poor death-mate, boy. All that blood in your veins, all that passion in your heart, all that despair for living. You're too hungry for death."

And then she laughs, and says, "*Holodnyy vovk syl'nishyy za sytu sobaku.*"

And then I wake up.



THE FIRST THING I notice is the steady beeping of hospital machinery. I blink away the darkness of sleep. It fades away, taking the old woman's laughing face with it.

A room comes into view. A hospital room with white walls, white lights, a vase of flowers, a blue blanket, an IV bag.

And then faces. An older man with smooth brown skin and a dark beard streaked with grey, his shirtsleeves rolled back, his arms crossed as he sleeps in an armchair. Lord Blackwood. Near him, Zachary, his glasses resting on top of his forehead, staring down into the cup of coffee in his left hand. Theodora sleeps with her head in his lap, her hair a silver pool on the dark green wool of his trousers, Zachary's right hand caressing the strands in his fingers.

Zahara's face rests next to mine, her cheek on the corner of my pillow. She's curled up in a chair pushed right up to my bed. Her hair is gathered back in a messy ponytail, and she's wearing a blazer far too large for her. She's fast asleep, her eyelashes resting on her silky cheek. There's a bruise spread across the right side of her face and a cut in her eyebrow.

I reach out to touch it.

She sits up like I've electrocuted her. "You're awake!"

“Your face,” I rasp.

Nobody hears me as the room springs awake just like Zahara did. Zach starts, spilling his coffee. Theo jumps awake, her blue eyes rimmed with pink. Lord Blackwood sits bolt upright in his chair. They all speak more or less simultaneously.

“Iakov—how are you feeling?” Zach says.

“Oh Iakov, you had us so afraid,” Theo says, running to the other side of the bed and grabbing my hand.

“He’s alright, young people, calm yourselves,” Mr Blackwood says, shaking his head. “Give the man some space.”

Zahara takes my cheeks in her hands and squeezes them, pressing her forehead to mine. “You made me a promise, remember? You can’t die until I allow you to.”

“I’m not dead,” I tell her.

But if I was, and if I somehow ended up straying my way into heaven, it would look a lot like this.

“I don’t think you should be the one in charge of deciding when Kav dies,” Zachary says to his sister. “That sounds like it should be up to him, no? It’s the whole point of free will.”

“Philosophy doesn’t belong in a hospital room,” Zahara says.

“I rather think that’s exactly where it belongs,” Zachary murmurs.

He sits himself down on the side of my bed, his hand finding Theo's without even looking, and he smiles at me. "How's your arm feeling?"

I glance down. I hadn't even realised my right hand was in a splint, wrapped all the way up and folded against my chest. I try to shrug, but a fresh wave of pain ripples through me, making me wince.

"Been better, mate."

"Looks like it, yes." He swallows and clears his throat. "I'm sorry I wasn't there to help."

"I'm sorry, too," Zahara whispers.

I turn to look at her, to tell her—to tell them both, the angelic Blackwood siblings—that they have no reason to apologise. But when I look at Zahara, now sitting up in her chair, all I can see is the bandage wrapped around her neck, the bruising on her face, livid purple and red, the cut in her eyebrow.

"What happened?" My voice comes out hoarse. "Your neck. Your face. Fuck. What happened—"

"Everything's alright," she says. I reach my good hand out to push aside loose strands of her hair, to inspect her neck, her face. She takes my hand in hers. "Iakov. I promise. I'm alright now."

"Did he come back? That fucker Mattner?"

"No, no, not Erik—god, I don't think I'll ever see Erik again after—"



“What happened to Erik?” Zach asks, eyes wide.

“I hate that man,” Theo murmurs. “I hope he got what was coming to him.”

I try to interrupt them. “Then who—”

“My daughter’s stalker was Professor Iain Sterling.” Lord Blackwood speaks up. His voice, grave and booming and full of authority, silences everyone in the room. “A professor at St Jude University. Or rather—a former professor. That man will never work again for the remainder of his life, most of which I will do everything in my power to ensure he spends behind bars.”

“A teacher at your university?” I ask, a twisting sensation in my chest.

What I don’t say out loud is, *Again?*

And, *Why does this keep happening to you?*

And, *I’m so sorry I couldn’t keep you safe.*

“It’s not my fault,” Zahara whispers, suddenly shrinking in on herself.

Everyone rushes forward in a chaos of protests.

“Zaro—of course it’s not your fault.”

“Don’t believe that for a moment.”

“That man is a predator, you’re not to blame for his actions.”

But Zaro’s eyes are on me and me alone. I shuffle over to her with a wince, wrap my arm around her shoulders, and pull her into my chest.

“I know,” I whisper in her hair. “I know.”

She buries her face into my neck. Tiny convulsions shake her shoulders. She cries with her entire body, but she doesn't make a noise.

“Let's go get another coffee,” Theo says, taking Zach's hand firmly in hers. “We'll be back in a bit. Caleb?”

Lord Blackwood gives a solemn nod. I catch his eye as he holds the door open for Theo and Zach to pass through. For a moment, we look at one another, and then he gives me a nod.

It's the smallest of gestures, but it seems to say, *Take care of her.*

I nod back.

*I will. Always.*



WHEN WE'RE ALONE, AND Zahara's stopped crying, and I've wiped her tears away with a corner of my blanket, she tells me everything.

Not just about Sterling, the meeting in his office, finding him in her apartment, fighting him off. She tells me everything else, too. She tells me about the knife and how it made her feel safe, about her crush on Sterling and how she just wanted someone to see her for who she was. About the men she's

dated, and how they made her feel, and she tells me about Mattner and every way he broke her heart and broke her down.

And then she takes a trembling breath and tells me about the other things—the older, deeper wounds. Her teacher in St Agnes and her parents' family friend. About her father, and how she thought he couldn't possibly love her after everything that had happened.

"I didn't think he could love me," she tells me in a broken rasp of a voice. "I didn't think anybody could love me."

"What is there not to love?" I ask her.

"You know what." She slumps forward and whispers like a secret, like a shameful confession. "I'm so *thorny*."

Even that word sounds pretty in her mouth. I stroke my finger across the bruise smeared on her cheek, wishing I could wipe it away.

"I like your thorns, though. And roses without thorns are weaker. They die faster."

"You're just saying that," she says with a huff of tearful laughter.

"No. It's true. Look it up."

"You're a botanist now?"

"I have to be. My girl loves plants."



AND AFTER THAT, SHE asks me about what happened to me, so I tell her.

And since she told me everything, every ugly, painful little thing, I do the same. About Yalinka and the Blood Moon and the black lake. About my death living in my chest, and about Lena and her watercolour set. About my mother and my father, about everything that happened to me.

My throat grows tight and my breath becomes heavy and laboured. I tell her the rest. Pashin and all the terrible dirty things I did to get information from him. My father asking me to kill the journalists, going to Luca for help, throwing that girl Willow to him in exchange for my sister.

And then, because I have no choice and because it would hurt more not to, I tell her about Lena. How she died when she was ten, how I couldn't save her, and how she never got a new watercolour set. I tell her about my father, and about Anton, and what happened in the townhouse in Belgravia.

She's crying by the time I'm done, crying in absolute silence, with enormous tears rolling from her brown eyes. She kisses me on my mouth soft and desperate, her lips wet and salty. I kiss her back and tangle my fingers in her hair and breathe in the sweet smell of her.

“I’m so sorry,” she says. “I’m so sorry all of this happened to you. And I’ve been so cruel. I’ve been so cruel to you, and for that, I can never forgive myself.”

“Yes, you’ve been thorny, and you’ve scratched me. You’ve scratched hard, Kolyuchka, but you’ve never hurt me.” I swipe my thumb across her lips, wiping away the tears. “I don’t think you even really wanted to hurt me. Probably because you love me or something.”

“Of course I love you!” she says, pulling away, a fierce frown on her face. Determination burns in her eyes like a beacon summoning an army. “I love you so much I wish I could lock you inside my heart and keep you there forever. I love you, Iakov Kavinski. I’m sorry I was always too proud to admit it. I would do anything for you.”

“You don’t need to do anything for me. Anything at all.” I hesitate, bite into my lip. “Maybe one thing.”

“Name it.”

“At some point, Zach’s going to come back in and ask me if I finished reading that Plato book. I’m going to tell him I have. Will you back me up?”

She bursts out laughing. Even though her voice is a shadow of itself, and her beautiful neck is all wrapped in bandages, and she’s laughing through her bruises, her laughter is still the most beautiful thing I’ve ever heard. Her laughter is just like her. Genuine and passionate and sweet with the merest edge of cruelty to it.

“He’s going to be angry with us,” she tells me once her laugh subsides. “I think the book burned in the fire.”

“Shit. Really?”

“Yes. And I hit Professor Sterling in the head with it.”

“You did?”

She nods proudly. “Oh yes. I hit him *hard*.”

“That’s my girl.”

She smiles, a slow, satisfied smile. “*Your* girl.”

I shrug. “If Zach doesn’t kill me.”

“He wouldn’t dare.”

“He might once he finds out what we did to his book. The perfect introduction to philosophy, he said.”

“More like the perfect self-defence weapon,” she says, dropping her head onto my shoulder.

“You don’t think it’s too early for us to be laughing at this shit?” I ask her.

“Oh, definitely. I think we might be in shock. I have no doubt the trauma is going to catch up with us sooner or later, and when it does, it’s going to be—god. It’s going to be a mess.”

I swallow. She’s right. Because I killed my father and Anton is probably in trouble and Lena is still dead, and I’ll have to account for all of those things eventually. So will Zahara after everything that happened to her.

I wrap her into my arms, press my lips to the top of her head and hold her as close as I dare.

“We’ll face it together when it does.”

Soft Spot



## Zahara

IN THE MORNING, MY father leaves with Zach and Theo to go to my flat and inspect the damages. Rhiannon and Sanvi arrive soon after. Rhiannon, bearing chocolates and fruit and flowers, like she didn't know which was most appropriate so she brought them all. Sanvi brings a bag with a change of clothes, toiletries and some makeup. I'm grateful to both of them, so grateful I can do nothing for ages except hold them to me with both arms.

When I finally let them go, I use the en suite bathroom of Iakov's room to shower and change. In the mirror, I see the image of a young woman who's me and not me at the same time. The long, glossy hair is the same, the brown eyes, the straight nose. The height is the same, the skin is the same soft brown.

But there's something different too. A strength I never saw in myself before. And something light and fresh, like a ray of light shining deep in my gaze.

Something like hope.

I come out of the bathroom to find Sanvi deep in conversation with Iakov while Rhiannon piles snacks onto his lap. He tries to eat and he tries to keep up with Sanvi's questioning. Rhiannon sees me and immediately says, "I told you Sterling was a fucking creep!"

I sigh and sit next to her on the edge of Iakov's bed. She wraps her arms around my neck. She's still wearing her coat and scarf, and both are wet with melted snow, but her hug is like a cup of hot chocolate for the soul.

"I'm so sorry this happened to you, Zee. You deserve better."

"Is Sterling going to go to prison?" Sanvi says. "You know how lax the law can be when it comes to crimes against women. Shall I ask my father to talk to his lawyers for you?"

"I'm sure my father's already on it," I reassure her. "I doubt Sterling will be able to get away with any of it. He put cameras in my place. That's going to backfire quite significantly on him."

"*Cameras.*" Sanvi shudders, hands on her mouth. "My god, Zaro. That's vile. Utterly vile."

"Why are men like this?" Rhiannon asks, and quickly putting her hand on Iakov's shoulder, she adds, "Not you, though."

He winces when her hand lands on his wounded shoulder but gives her a nod. "Thanks."

"What are you going to do, Zaro?" Sanvi asks. "About the apartment? Your degree?"

"I have no idea. I don't know. I feel... I think I just feel tired. I'm going to rest, and process everything, and then... I don't know. Carry on, probably. I don't want to wallow, and I don't want to cower. I want to live my life. I want to be happy."

Rhiannon grins from ear to ear. “Fucking yes! That’s some shit I can get behind, Zee. Let’s go. I’ll be by your side the whole time, and Dai, and Iakov, of course.” And she looks from me to him quickly. “Are you two an item now or what?”

“Rhi!” Sanvi exclaims.

“You want to know too, come on,” Rhiannon says.

“Give them some privacy,” Sanvi says, “after everything that’s happened, they deserve it.”

Rhiannon turns around to Iakov and whispers sotto voce, “Are you her boyfriend?”

“I love her,” Iakov says solemnly.

A burst of heat rises to my cheeks. I hadn’t expected him to say that. Rhiannon lets out an enthusiastic squeal, and Sanvi quietly claps her hands together. I meet Iakov’s gaze across the room, and he’s smiling.

He should smile more often. Because his smile makes his eyes crinkle and a deep dimple appear in one cheek and it makes him look youthful and innocent and drop-dead gorgeous.

*I love you too, I mouth.*



LATER, IAKOV FALLS ASLEEP after a fresh dose of pain meds, his hand going limp in mine. I can't bring myself to move away from him, so I stay at his bedside, and Sanvi and Rhiannon bring chairs over so we can all sit together.

I fill them in with what happened—all of it. Properly. It hurts a little less to tell them than it did to tell Iakov, and maybe that means it'll hurt less and less over time. When I've told them everything, I swallow the lump in my throat and say, "Thank you so much. For calling my brother. For saving my life, probably."

Sanvi brushes her fingers over my bandage neck and blinks tears out of her eyes.

"I wish I'd said something earlier. God. I would have been so scared if I were you."

"You're one strong bitch," Rhiannon says. "You need to get your boyfriend to give us self-defence lessons."

Rhiannon's levity balances Sanvi's emotions perfectly, and the lump in my throat eases. "I'm sure he won't mind."

"Maybe he could start a business. Teaching women how to fight men. Teaching us how to survive all the psychos out there."

I think about what Iakov told me last night. The little sister he's been searching for all these years and how she died at ten years old. Thinking about it is a different kind of pain, a pain like there's a knife lodged deep into my heart and I'm not sure I'll ever be able to get it out. Or rather, a pain like there's a

knife lodged deep inside Iakov's heart, and there's nothing I could ever do to help him.

"I think he'd like that."

"Are you..." Sanvi lets out a sigh like there's a weight on her chest. "Are you alright? Are you going to be alright?"

"I think so. I hope so."

"Well, you don't have to be. Not right away." Rhiannon smiles and loops her arms around my neck and Sanvi's. "It's okay to not be alright sometimes. We've got you, Zee. Dai and I. We've got you. You know that?"

"I know."

"I love you girls," Sanvi says, her voice squeaky with repressed tears.

"I love you too," I say.

"I love you both," Rhiannon says, knocking her forehead into ours. "I'd go to war for you beauts." She lowers her voice. "Which reminds me. I want a knife just like yours, Zee."

"I'm not sure you should have one," I whisper back, thinking about how rowdy she gets after a few drinks.

"For self-defence," she clarifies.

"I want one too," Sanvi says, also lowering her voice.

"I'll ask Iakov," I tell them, thinking about the knife I stole from him and how he gave me my own and never even asked for his back.



IAKOV IS STILL ASLEEP several hours later when the room door opens and Theo and Zach walk in. They are closely followed by a girl with black hair and pretty eyes. She's wearing plain jeans and a moss-green top flecked with paints at the sleeves. I've never met her properly, but I know her face well. She's the girl plastered all over Séverin Montcroix's social media. His fiancée, Anaïs Nishihara, the French-Japanese artist.

He comes in after her, looking like he's stepped right off a runway and carrying a white box tied with a ribbon. His green eyes are wide and his mouth drops open when he sees Iakov.

“Jesus, Kav!”

Iakov stirs and blinks slowly. He tries to sit up with a grunt, and I help him as best I can. Anaïs calmly walks over to him and kisses his cheek.

“Hi, Iakov.”

“Hi, Anaïs,” he says groggily.

“Kav!” Sev exclaims. He drops the white box at the foot of the bed and takes Iakov's head in his ring-laden fingers. “You fucking menace! You scared the shit out of me. Did you get *shot*? Was it your dickhead father? This is why you need to

respond to texts, Kav, because I never know if you're just ignoring me because you're playing video games or because you're lying in a ditch somewhere.”

“Get off him,” Anaïs says, gently but firmly pushing her fiancé off Iakov. “You’ll suffocate him. Noël says hi, by the way.”

“Tell him I say hi Noël. And I’m alright, Sev,” Iakov says, voice still rough with sleep. “I’ll fill you in with everything later. But I’m alright. This looks worse than it is.”

I think about how the doctor said he might have to spend months in rehab to regain full arm mobility, but I don’t say anything. I’m starting to understand how Iakov functions, the way he projects his strength so that he can be strong, like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

“Ah, I’m sorry, man, you know I worry about you. You should come stay at Château Montcroix this summer, we’ll take care of you. Do you fancy it?” Séverin turns towards me like the question is addressed to both of us. “Zaro? Fancy it? You and Kav, Château Montcroix? The French summer, good food, good wine—great company?”

After everything that’s happened, getting out of London sounds amazing. Before I can even answer, Sev’s expression brightens, and he grabs the box from the end of the bed and hands it to Iakov.

“Got you a little present.”

Iakov tugs on the box and opens it with his good hand. He glances into the box and looks up with a little grin, looking from Sev to Zach.

“Petit-fours,” he says.

That word in his mouth, so delicate and sweet, sounds so incongruous and adorable it makes me want to melt.

“Zach told me you’re partial to them,” Sev says. His face shines with his smile. He looks like he can think of nothing more delightful than feeding his hospitalised friend tiny cakes.

Zach, standing a little away with his arm wrapped around Theo, is smiling too. My eyes move around the room. Every face is turned to Iakov and his box of tiny cakes, and there isn’t a single person who’s not beaming.

To think this man ever thought he was only good for dying.



THE AFTERNOON MELTS INTO the evening. After a round of introductions, everyone settles around the room, groups forming and shifting as the hours go by. Eventually, the nurses kick everyone out so they can change Iakov’s bandaging. Rhiannon, Sanvi, Sev and Anaïs all leave to go grab dinner together, Rhiannon and Anaïs walking arm in arm, already deep in a conversation about art.



Zach and Theo take me to a cafe near the hospital since they know I'm going to go straight back to Iakov's room. We order coffee and food, and Zach fills me in with the latest news.

“Sterling's been arrested and Father's already mustered his army of lawyers. I can't imagine he's going to get away with any of it. Sterling got lucky journalists were at the scene because I rather think he'd have vanished off the face of the earth by now if it wasn't for them. Anyway, Father's doing his best to keep the news contained, but I imagine this story will be quite big. I'm sorry, Zaro.”

I nod. “I'm done hiding, Zach. I've not done anything wrong. I'm going to stand up and fight.”

“We're fighting with you,” Theo says, quiet and earnest, her blue eyes full of that quiet strength of hers I've always admired. “We're fighting with you, and we're fighting for you, and for every woman that beast has victimised. Because I have a feeling you won't be the only one, Zaro.”

Zach clears his throat, takes a sip of coffee, and continues, “As for your apartment, Zaro... It's pretty damaged, and you've lost a lot of your things, but the apartment could be salvaged if you wanted. If you want to stay there...?”

He sounds hesitant, like he wants to say something but isn't sure whether he should.

“I think it's probably time I find somewhere new,” I say lightly. “I've only got a few months left of university, so I might stay in a hotel for now, and then... And then I think I'd like to get out of London for a while.”

“There’s always Oxford,” Zach says, eyes glittering.

“Maybe.”

“Will you... will you be taking Iakov with you?” Theo asks delicately.

She exchanges a glance with Zach. As usual, his free hand rests on the low of her back, tracing circles through the soft cream wool of her jumper. This time, though, I feel no envy.

“If he’d like to come with me, I’d like him to,” I answer, avoiding Zach’s eyes.

“I can’t imagine he wouldn’t,” Theo says, a tiny smile on her lips. “I’ve always suspected he had a soft spot for you.”

“I think he likes me more than Zach,” I say, sneaking Zach a little smirk.

He leans forward, resting his chin on his palm. “Oh, I hardly think it’s a comparable thing,” he says, “the way Iakov feels about me and the way he feels about *you*.”

I stare at him and for a second, my heart doesn’t dare to beat.

And then I blurt out, “I love him, I really love him. I hope that’s alright.”

“There’s nobody else in the world I would want you to love more than him,” Zach says. He speaks so solemnly it makes my breath catch. “And there’s nobody in the world I would trust more with your heart than him.”



THAT NIGHT, IN THE dim glow of the hospital night lights, I lie curled up on the side of Iakov's hospital bed, my head tucked into his good shoulder. A film plays on the television screen, but it's Iakov's heartbeat I'm listening to. The strong, steady rhythm of it, like a drum inside a mountain.

"Doctor said it might take up to three months," he says. "Before my arm is back to normal."

I crane my head back to look at him. "Three months isn't so bad."

"It's a long time to be useless," he says.

"You're not useless, you're injured." I take his cheek in my hand, caress the bruised skin. "Besides, how can you be useless if nobody's using you? You don't have to be of service to anybody to deserve your existence. You can just exist."

He looks at me, blinking slowly, a slight frown on his face.

"What good am I if I can't see you safe," he says finally.

"You're not my bodyguard, Iakov."

His eyes flick away from mine. He lets out a sharp sigh, like his chest is too tight, and turns back to me.

"What am I, then?"

I shrug and brush my hand over his head, through the black fuzz growing there. I try to keep my voice light and my tone carefree. “You could just be my boyfriend—if you wanted.”

“A thug like me?” he asks, tangling his fingers in my hair. “You can do better.”

“Not in a lifetime,” I tell him, and then I shut him up with a kiss.

It’s a kiss intended to be tender and a little playful. But Iakov opens his mouth under mine and tightens his fingers around the nape of my neck. I melt against him like candyfloss in water. When he pulls away to catch a breath, his lips are wet and his black eyes are heavy-lidded.

“Do you know what Erik said to me when he broke up with me?” I breathe.

“What did he say?”

“He told me that if I wanted affection, I should get a dog.”

Iakov shakes his head, but a grin curls the corner of his mouth. A true Iakov grin, sharp and a little feral. “Guess you did get a dog.”

He raises his mouth to mine once more, and I answer against his lips.

“Not a dog. A wolf.”

# BOOK SIX



*Normal  
Shit*



# Epilogue

## Iakov

IT TAKES ME CLOSER to six months to recover full use of my arm. It's a long six months, and a lot happens. A lot of good things, a lot of bad things.

The news of the court case against Sterling breaks, and no matter how contained Lord Blackwood's team manages to keep things, the press hounds Zahara for months. Despite this, she stays strong and refuses to back down. She finishes her degree and graduates with honours. She spends some time with Rhiannon and Sanvi, and some time with her family, and then we spend a month at Château Montcroix with Sev's family, Anaïs and her brother Noël. Those are good days, and the whole time I feel like I'm in a dream, like things don't get to be this good, like I don't get to be this lucky.

At the end of the summer, I get a call from Anton. I fly over to Russia and we meet in Moscow. He looks good. He's put on weight and quit smoking. Or says he has anyway. Guys like us never fully quit.

He doesn't tell me much about what happened after he kicked me out of the townhouse, but I guess he put a lot of work into burying what happened. My father's death hits the news, but by the time it does, the truth about him has already emerged. I made sure it would—thanks to the journalists my father wanted dead and the information I sent them.

It felt like the right thing to do.



I ask Anton if there's going to be an investigation. I don't want him to spend time in prison for a crime he didn't commit. But he refuses to tell me anything—he says it's his problem, not mine. Instead, he tells me about my father's will. Everything he owns is mine now. His money, his assets, his businesses.

“I don't want it,” I tell Anton.

“You don't want what, patsan?”

“Any of it.”

Anton fights me for a long time over this. He tries to tell me it's mine by right, that I deserve it after everything my father put me through. But I don't care. None of it could make me change my mind. In the end, I ask Lord Blackwood and his lawyers for help. I sign almost everything over to Anton, aside from some money and properties which I set aside for my mother and her family.

In retaliation, Anton opens an account for me, and a stock portfolio. He tells me I'll never have to work in my life.

I tell him I like working.

He tells me to shut the fuck up and come for dinner with his family sometime.



IT TAKES ME ALMOST a year to go back to St Petersburg. It's Zahara who persuades me to go and arranges the trip. Despite being trapped in the endless purgatory of the case against Sterling, she's the one who makes sure we both see therapists.

"We don't need to forget the things that happened to us," she tells me one night when neither of us can sleep and we lie entangled in bed talking the long hours away. "We just need to heal from them."

And I know she's right.

We meet my mother, her husband and her daughter in Alexander Park. It's early autumn; the canal is green and the trees look like flames. My mother somehow looks exactly as I remember her. Kind and soft and blue-eyed and a little tired. Her hair is silver all over now, and she's wrapped in a big coat. Her husband, a tall, spindly man with glasses and soft grey eyes, holds her hand tightly in his.

When she sees me, her eyes fill with tears. I have the strange, detached realisation that this is the first time I've ever seen her cry. She didn't cry when my father came for me that day, not even when he beat me half to death and dragged me out of the flat by my hair. Maybe she was stronger then, or maybe she was too scared. I wonder if she cried for Lena the way she weeps for me now.

Her husband lets go of her hand and she stands in front of me like she doesn't dare to touch me.

“You’ve grown so tall, my Yasha.” She covers her mouth with her hands, and then she whispers, almost in awe, “I never imagined you would be like this.”

I rub my hand across the fuzz of my hair. After my father died, there was no fairy tale transformation, no broken curse. I didn’t change from a beast back into a man. I still wear my hair buzzed short, I still wear black. I have a few new tattoos; a bullet on the hand I shot my father with, Anton’s name, and a crimson rose right over my heart.

I let out an awkward laugh and say, “Like a thug?”

She shakes her head and stands on her toes to cup my cheek in her hand. “I never imagined you would grow up to look so beautiful.”

My throat closes up tight. For a long moment, I can’t say anything, so I just wrap my arms around her and hold her in silence. We’ll have to talk sometime, I realise, *really* talk, about everything that happened to both of us since, about our lives now, about her husband and Zahara. We’ll have to talk, eventually, about Lena. Just not yet.



DARINA, MY HALF-SISTER, LOOKS as pretty and delicate as a daisy. She has golden hair and a very serious face. She shakes my hand when I introduce myself to her.

“I always knew I would meet you one day,” she tells me in a solemn tone.

“Do you think we’re gonna get on?” I ask her, squeezing her little hand.

“Oh, yes. I think so. There’s about a million things you have to learn about me and maybe about a million things I want to know about you.”

“That’s a lot of things.”

She gives a little wise smile. “We have all the time in the world, right?”

“Right.”

All of us walk together along the crescent of the park. Zahara, the born socialite, keeps the conversation flowing with ease, keeping all the painful ghosts between us all at bay. For that, I’ll be grateful to her for the rest of my life.

Before we part, my mother hugs me tight, so tight I hear the cracking of her shoulders, and she says, “Will you come visit us, Yasha? You and your lovely girlfriend?”

“Yea. We’ll come visit.” I kiss her on the top of her head. “We’ll come often. I promise.”



AFTERWARDS, ZAHARA ASKS ME how I feel.

I tell her I don't know.

What I feel is something I can't put into words. Something like love and regret and shame all mixed up, and a sort of nostalgia for something I didn't actually have. A strange, bittersweet feeling. A sense of belonging combined with a sense of alienation.

My mother and Darina are related to me, and I know they'll always be part of my life now. The way I feel about them, all those difficult emotions, are wrapped up in hope. Hope for a good future, a connection not tangled up with dark memories.

But the truth is that I don't know if they'll ever *feel* like my family.

Because now, my family is Zach and Theo and Christmases spent in their apartment in Oxford. My family is Lord and Lady Blackwood having me at their house during school holidays when I was in Spearcrest without ever questioning why I wasn't going back to my own home. My family is Anaïs and Sev, Château Montcroix or summer days spent in their flat in Japan. Anaïs sitting on the floor painting with Sev watching her like she's the most beautiful thing in the world while I play video games with Noël.

My family is Rhiannon and Sanvi, movie nights in Zahara's hotel suite or out in town. Keeping an eye on their drinks while they dance under rainbow lights. Teaching them self-defence and being on standby when they go on blind dates. Meeting Rhiannon's wildcard brother one weekend and

laughing uncontrollably with Zahara as we watch Rhiannon desperately trying to matchmake him and Sanvi.

Zahara too is family. Or rather, she's going to be someday.

I realise that one winter evening after we move to Edinburgh, where Zahara is planning to do her Master's. I have a small part-time job at a boxing gym where I train, teaching some kids' classes. It doesn't pay a lot, but thanks to Anton that's not a problem. It does give me a sense of purpose though, and it turns out I have a bit of an affinity for working with troubled teenage boys who use violence as an outlet.

One night, I get back home from the boxing gym to find Zahara in the kitchen. Our Edinburgh flat is much smaller than the place she had in Knightsbridge, but she's still managed to make it look like a live-in museum. Gilded frames and antiques and plants and flowers everywhere. It's beautiful and ornate and golden, like living inside Zahara's soul.

"Come and see what I've made you!" Zahara calls out giddily from the kitchen counter.

Her feet are bare on the kitchen floor, and her hair, which she's currently wearing in long braids, is kept away from her face with a silk Chanel scarf. She's wearing an apron over her short dress, and when she turns around to smile at me, there's a streak of flour or sugar crossing her cheek. I laugh and catch her in my arms.

"What did you make?"

She lifts a colour tray of tiny éclair, fondants and tartlets.

“You made those?”

“Every single one of them! All those petit-fours! With my own two hands!”

“For what occasion?”

She turns to look at me in surprise. “What do you mean? No occasion. I made them because I thought they would make you happy.”

*You make me happy, I want to tell her. My beautiful rose, my thorny saviour. You make me happy because you're the place where I feel most safe and most loved.*

*And one day, I'm going to marry you.*

My heart feels so full I can barely speak, but I do show her how happy I am. And later, I try to return the favour in the best way I can, with my body and my hands and my tongue. Fucking Zahara is an act of worship, a prayer she answers with whimpered commands and moans of pleasure. When she's lying on the bed with her thighs shuddering and her skin gleaming with sweat, I press my lips to the place between her shoulder blades, where her wings might have been, and I tell her everything I wanted to tell her earlier.

“Marry me, Iakov Kavinski,” she replies with a lazy smile. “Go on. I dare you.”

“I would never dare to disobey you, Zahara Blackwood.”

“Because I'm your cruel mistress?”

“Because you're the love of my fucking life.”



ZAHARA DOESN'T BRING UP Lena until I do, and it takes me almost a whole year to bring myself to do it. I thought it would be painful to finally talk about her, but it's still more painful than I expected. But Zahara, herself an adept when it comes to pain, holds me tight and comforts me. And together, on a quiet, sunny spring day, we finally go to Yalinka.

It looks somehow exactly as I remember it, and not at all at the same time. The mountain still overlooks the town, and the trees still form a green barrier around it. The black lake, I know, is there somewhere, but the dead woman doesn't call to me like she used to. I don't know if she ever will again.

The cemetery, behind an old church away from the apartment blocks, is empty when we enter it. The sky above us is vivid blue, and the trees are in full bloom, flower petals drifting in the silent breeze.

My knees buckle when we get to Lena's grave, the reality of it a sudden shock to the system. I stumble, and Zahara catches me by my waist, doing her best to support my weight. My throat is thick and my eyes burn. For the longest moment, I can do nothing but look at the gravestone, reading my sister's name over and over again.



Zahara lays down the bouquet of meadow flowers we brought with us. She arranged it herself, bright, pretty flowers—the kind a little girl would have loved. I reach into my pocket and pull out a box of watercolours. Kneeling on the grass, I lay it next to the flowers.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come earlier, Lena. I was scared. I’m sorry. Now that I’m here, it doesn’t feel so scary anymore. You’re gone, and I miss you. But I’ll keep you in my heart, always, little sister. Hope I see you again one day. In the meantime, I hope you like the watercolours. A real artist helped me pick these out for you, you know. I wish I could have given you this before you died. I wish so many things had been different. Mostly I wish for you to be alright. Hope you’re not angry at me, Lena. I tried my best and it wasn’t enough and I’m sorry. I love you. And I hope you’re happy, wherever you are.”

Zahara’s warm hand rests on my shoulder, but she doesn’t say anything. She waits silently, and when I’m ready to go, she stops and leans down to brush her fingers over the gravestones.

She whispers, “Goodbye for now, Yelena. I wish I’d met you. But we’ll be back soon. We’ll be back often. And don’t worry. I’ll look after him for you. I promise.”



SHE NEVER BREAKS THAT promise.

*The End*



## Acknowledgements

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*Thank you to my family and as always a particular thank you to my brother, for supporting my dream from day one and for always encouraging me to go for it. You believed in my dream before I ever did, you believe in me far more than I ever think I could believe in myself. I admire and love you.*

*Thank you to my mother, who made me fall in love with books. I would be proud to become even half the woman you*

*are.*

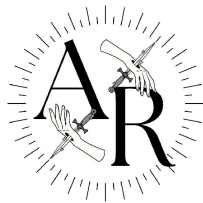
*Finally, and always, thank you to M, my sister beyond flesh and blood, and thank you to R, for being the first person to make me feel completely safe.*

## Sign up for Dark Heart



[Sign up to my mailing list for \(monthly-ish\) updates, snippets, graphics and goodies of all sorts.](#)

## About Aurora



Aurora Reed is a coffee-drinking academic who is fascinated by stories of darkness, death and desire. When she's not reading over a cup of black coffee, she can be found roaming the moors or scribbling stories by candlelight.

**a f g j**



Also By Aurora Reed

# **Want to find out about Evan Knight and his obsession with his perfect prefect Sophie Sutton?**



**Five years ago, Evan Knight was my favourite person at Spearcrest Academy.**

When every rich kid treated me like I was the dirt under their shoes, he was the only one who accepted me for who I was. Until I found out his golden exterior is only there to hide a rotten heart.

Now, every encounter with him is a nightmare.

But in nightmares, you can kill your monsters. Evan is a monster I can't kill—no matter how much I want to. The kind of monster I'll never be free from until I escape Spearcrest.

I just have to make it through our last year.

**I'm rich enough to have anything or anyone I want.**

Anything or anyone—except for the stuck-up prefect Sophie Sutton.

But I don't want Sophie. I just want to break her. Because clashing with Sophie isn't just for my amusement—it's become an addiction.

She thinks she's gotten good at avoiding me, until Spearcrest sets her up to tutor me. I have a year to break her. My dearest opponent, my hateful adversary.

*Let the battle begin.*

**Curious about French playboy Sev Montcroix and the mysterious fiancée he *definitely* doesn't want to be engaged to?**



**I've never met a woman impervious to my charm.**

And they all accept my terms—an evening of fun, a night of pleasure, and then we're done. They leave my bed satisfied, and I keep my heart intact.

Until Anaïs Nishinara comes crashing into my life. Our parents arrange our engagement, and they send Anaïs to my school so “we can get to know each other”.

Except she's not interested in doing that. She's a weird loner who prefers her sketchbook to the glamour of my old money lifestyle.

*I don't want Anaïs—I don't even like her. So why can't I seem to keep away from her?*

**Séverin Montcroix is a rude, spoilt, arrogant aristocrat.**

And now I'm engaged with him and attending the prestigious Spearcrest Academy where he rules as one of the Young

Kings. But I don't believe in kings—or princes, or fairy tales,  
or love.

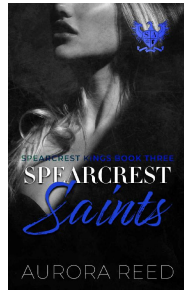
I believe in myself, my art, and my plan to get out of this  
engagement.

Except that for someone who claims to hate being engaged to  
me, Séverin just refuses to leave me alone.

Is he playing games, or does he have a plan of his own?

*And why is it getting harder to resist his attempts at seduction?*

# Want to find out what happened between Zachary Blackwood and his academic rival Theodora Dorokhova?



**My life is perfect from the outside.**

But it's all a lie, a perfect illusion crafted to hide the sad truth:  
my life is a beautiful cage, and my father holds the key.

Especially when it comes to my heart.

Dating is strictly forbidden, not that it would matter much to  
me. If only it wasn't for Zachary Blackwood.

The heir to the centuries-old Blackwood fortune, my academic  
rival for the past six years... and the only person capable of  
seeing through the cracks in my facade.

**Theodora Dorokhova is beautiful, intelligent, elusive—and  
the only student in Spearcrest I can't best.**

No matter how long I try, no matter how hard I work. But this  
is our final year in Spearcrest, and we've both been selected  
for an academic excellence programme.

This time, there can only be one victor. And it's going to be  
me. I won't let anything get in my way—not even my heart.

Because I love Theodora. I love her completely,  
overwhelmingly, desperately, even though we'll never be  
together.

*Our love is written in the stars—Theodora is just afraid to  
look up.*