

THE BEAUTY OF IMPERFECTION SERIES

Kindled  
Souls

A REVERSE HAREM NOVEL BY  
**ELIZABETH READ**

# KINDLED SOULS

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## NOTE TO READER

Kindled Souls is the second installment of the Beauty Of Imperfection series. This book covers heavy themes that may be sensitive to some readers.

Please be advised of the following potential triggers:

- Heavy Drug Use
- Addiction
- Overdose
- Child Neglect
- Mental Illnesses

I like to write characters with flaws and who struggle in life. If this isn't for you then I hope to see you again in my future books! Take care of yourself.

# QUICK THANKS

Just want to say thank you to everyone cheering me forward.

My beta readers who took time out to read my work and offering help when I needed it.

I especially want to thank my husband who is my number one supporter.

Thank you!



*“I used to believe in one true soulmate, but not anymore. I believe you can have a few.”* — Paul Walker

# CHAPTER ONE

## GRACE

A thunderous boom vibrated the floorboards under my feet. Even with the carpet covering, I could still feel the intensity of it. It was the only feeling I could sense while standing wordlessly, floating in my mind. I was out of place and detached from everything around me.

I had seen the rain pouring down like a blanket, making everything appear in a gray haze. The wind blew against the trees, battering them with a gale force, tearing leaves out of their stems. I noticed the cars neatly parked in the school's student parking lot as we passed them, but it all felt miles away.

I wasn't *really* here. I was in shock. I didn't even know how we got here in the first place. I couldn't remember returning to the school grounds or climbing up the stairs to reach Vincent's dorm room.

"Go put these on," Vincent handed me a bundle of fabric. His gray eyes took me in with a certain apprehension.

“What?” I was breathless and disheveled. We hadn’t spoken for a long while, and his voice sounded too abrupt for my mind to catch. I didn’t think I could even grip onto anything at this moment. I was detached, floating aimlessly, hoping that Vincent would catch me.

“You’re shivering,” he continued to stare, locked onto mine with those unflinching steel eyes. It was a latch that I needed, a type of anchor for my mind to hold on to. I looked down at his tattooed arm, still outstretched with the bundle of clothing.

*A golden koi fish.*

Vincent’s slightly slanted eyes narrowed down at me. “Go into the bathroom and change out of your wet clothes,” he ordered, pointing to a door next to his bureau.

*He was wet too,* I thought, as I noticed his white button-up top was see-through. It clung to him like skin, showing his outline perfectly.

We were soaked to the bone. Our hair clung to our faces like sticky cobwebs while the streams of water happily glided down the wetted strands. Vincent was so close that I could see the droplets hanging onto his eyelashes. Water trails streamed down his face, imitating what he would look like if he cried. He didn’t seem to notice while he placed the dry items in my hands.

I was shivering. I could feel the trembling quiver in my body, but it wasn’t from the cold. I blinked slowly, still trying to remember how we got here.

*We were by the lake...*

“Grace, go change.” Vincent’s voice cut into my thoughts, and I was happy for it. I didn’t want to think. It was hurting my head to do so.

*Don’t think, just do,* I told myself. My legs moved. I was on autopilot as I made my way through the bathroom door. My hand felt heavy as I gripped the handle, not feeling, not seeing. The bathroom was simple. The light already on was so bright that I winced in pain from it as I stood there, looking at nothing while I dripped rainwater on the tile floor.

*What had just happened? Vincent... Vincent happened. Had I just made everything up? He’d told me. He’d touched me.* I thought as I trailed my hand over my lips.

His cold fury was unleashed at that moment. I’d felt him filling me with his emotions, but now I couldn’t feel him. Before, I felt his cool presence, but now it was hollow, seemingly empty.

*Vincent was part of my circle, wasn’t he?*

Taking a deep breath, I tried to reach out. I needed that reassurance, that proof that this wasn’t something I made up. But, instead, I hit an icy wall. It felt so cold that it made goosebumps rise along my arms, and my teeth chattered. I could feel it wrapped around where Vincent was meant to be inside me. He was there but locked so tightly that I couldn’t feel him.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to clear my mind.

*Focus on the task first, I thought to myself. It's simple, I just have to change into the clothes, and then I can have a breakdown after. I told myself. Don't think, do.*

Lifting the shirt, I instantly knew it was too big for me. Unfolding it to check its size, a hint of an aroma came off it. Inhaling the fabric, I smelled the familiar scent of sunscreen and herbal lemon.

*Lucas.*

Clenching my eyes, I tried to hold the pain and confusion inside. The need to cry and scream hit me again, making it difficult to breathe. So many questions ran through my head, like a speeding train that couldn't stop at any station as it continued going faster and faster.

I lifted my block on Lucas, who quickly flooded me with his emotions and warmth. He filled his part in my chest, solidifying as he anchored down. The weight of him made it possible for me to press my heels firmly on the heated tile floor. He wasn't going to be pushed out again, and I didn't want to be separated any longer. It had left me feeling hollow.

It was so different from what I felt with Vincent. Mine and Lucas's bond was open, exposed, and connected. It permitted me to feel him. I clung to it happily, soaking up Lucas's essence as it twisted my insides tighter, holding me. A satisfying breath eased its way out of me while Lucas sent wave after wave of reassurance, comfort, and guilt.

I could feel his self-hatred turning in his stomach as he opened our bond fuller now, allowing me to see it all. He

wanted me to know his anger at Vincent for keeping it a secret.

*Why?* I sent a silent question to him, causing the bond between us to dim, recoiling slightly. Shame and hopelessness poured out of him, but his answer was clear. He believed it wasn't his place to tell.

With Lucas' warmth pouring into me, it helped decrease my trembling. Breathing became easier as I focused on drying myself with a towel and putting on the soft, baggy clothes.

I couldn't stop myself from reaching out to Vincent. The same icy wall blocked me, but I knew I wasn't going insane. He was behind it, just like I knew he was behind the door in his bedroom, most likely waiting for me to exit. I didn't want to.

*Coward*, my mind snapped at me as my body trembled again. Confusion flooded me once more, questions I knew I had to ask. Why didn't he tell me we were part of a circle? Did he want me? They were questions I knew I didn't want to be answered.

A loud clap of noise came abruptly, making me jump as the thunder shattered my inner struggle. I could feel the room tremble at its furious loudness, overpowering the sound of the rainfall hitting from above.

Leaving my wet clothes in the basin, I gathered myself to face Vincent. My hand hovered over the door, shaking, along with my exhale.

*I have to do this*, I thought before I opened the door without leaving any room to think.

It was then that I had a clearer mind to see Vincent's bare room. There was nothing on the light gray walls, no posters, no pictures of friends and family. It was exactly like mine had been, except mine now was just starting to grow. I had started putting pictures up, stuff I borrowed from friends was starting to litter around, and my things didn't always have to have a place. Finally, it was starting to feel lived in.

While Vincent's was too clean, too formal, and rigid.

Unlived in.

No dirty clothes were on the floor, and his desk was precisely organized. No pen was out of place, all in line with his rubber and ruler. His bookshelf was perfectly full in an orderly fashion. His bed looked like you could bounce a quarter off it. My gaze went to his nearly empty wash bin next to me. It had a few folded clothes neatly inside.

*Insane...*

"Taking in your fill?" Vincent's voice cut the thick silence. He was currently by his large window, looking out at the gray haze of the rainfall. Another loud rumble erupted, sending vibrations through the dorm house foundation.

He had changed out of his wet clothes as well. He wore the style I was given, a loose black top with baggy gray sweats. His black hair was in disarray, and his glasses were back on, resting on his nose.

“I don’t mean to be nosy.” I took a hesitant step forward, which I instantly regretted as his gray steel eyes snapped at me.

“Yes, you do.” He tapped his chest, eyes unblinking, “You’re part of my circle. I know.”

Confirmation.

We were part of a circle. He gave it to me without asking the question, but I was still speechless. Still scared to breathe as I waited for him to continue, I needed his explanation.

*Why did you hide from me?* I wanted to ask but was too scared to utter those words. Instead, I was more concerned about the lack of feeling Vincent’s emotions.

“I can’t feel you,” I whispered, my chest tightening with rising panic. Was there something wrong with me that prevented me from feeling him?

“I know,” Vincent said somberly, his gaze returning to the window, though I sensed he wasn’t seeing out of it.

As I felt the barrier between us again, I realized there was nothing wrong with me. Vincent had deliberately placed the block there, separating us.

“Why?” I asked, feeling the pain of his choice. It made me long for his presence.

Vincent sighed long and hard before turning back to me. He stepped towards me and grabbed my hand, but once we touched, our breaths caught. Vincent’s eyes dilated, and he



shook himself, mumbling a curse under his breath, before pulling me to sit beside him on his bed.

I had no choice but to follow. My body lit up like a Christmas tree making my soul dance, while his coldness enveloped me again from our touch.

It was an odd sensation. I was reacting just as sensitive as when Lucas and I connected. But with that connection, it was based on feeling each other's emotions. I wondered if we were sensitive to touch as it was our only form of connection.

“Grace, I never wanted you to find out like this,” Vincent said, pulling me out of his hypnotic touch.

I didn't know what to say as I looked at him, seeing him now as one of my circle members.

I looked over at his wet, messy black hair that was normally formal and tidy. His jaw was narrow like his nose, and his eyes creased slightly at the corners. He had a long neck with a singular mole against his jugular. He had a neat and composed image and personality, contrasting with Lucas's chaotic demeanor.

I had to wonder why fate had picked the three of us. We had the least amount of common ground on the planet.

“I was going to tell you once everything was sorted,” Vincent spoke as if I wasn't staring blankly at him. “But I'm afraid I must ask you to keep this private.”

“Private?” I blinked, trying to make sense of what he had just said.

A new chill was creeping over me, but this wasn't coming from Vincent.

“Yes. I don't want anyone to know yet.”

“You don't want a circle?” The coldness in my chest was now growing rapidly.

“I do. I want a circle, but given how things are, I'm not ready to be... open.”

“Open?” My head was fuzzy as I tried to figure out what was happening. I tried to feel our bond naturally, only to hit the wall again. I needed to feel what he was feeling. I needed reassurance that he did want us, want me.

“Yes,” He said, completely oblivious to my panic, “I want our circle to be private. With no one else knowing.”

“Why?” Was it me? Did he not want Lucas and me? Was he ashamed? I heard gossip about his supposed blue-blood heritage. It was a rumor that people told in school, along with the one fact that he might have been a Mundane. The latter one, of course, ended up false, but the one about him being from old money was still up in the air.

Vincent always carried an aristocratic manner about him. How he walked and his appearance at school had become a new normality to me. His strict, uptight custom was just his way, but that went out the window when I saw him at my first party. But even in that style, he was still orderly.

So many questions and so few answers. If those weren't the reasons, what else could he say to explain his need to be

closed off? He was distancing himself from us. The ice wall between us was a clear indication of that.

“You know how overwhelmed you get? And you just want something to hold on to for a moment, a pause, a small break, just a moment of having some control back?”

I blinked, unsure what to make of his description of finding out we were part of a circle. On the one hand, I got it. It was overwhelming. I didn't even want to find my circle members, but another part wanted Vincent's joy, his celebration of finding each other.

A wave of grief hit me for Lucas. He felt everything when I was overwhelmed, my anxiety when I found out he was mine. How unfair I was to ruin his moment at finding me. He must have felt my lackluster thrill when we found each other.

My whole body stilled as a wave of horror hit me. Vincent was just like me. I was suddenly grateful I couldn't feel Vincent. It hurt already, just by his words, but it would be torturous to feel them coming from him.

*'Am I what you expected?'* Lucas's question hit me hard. He knew the answer. Looking back at his face, I could tell he already knew by the way he grimaced after asking the question. We both just couldn't say it out loud.

Here I was, complaining that Vincent wasn't happy, while I did the same to Lucas.

“You understand, don't you, Grace? I'm just not ready for a circle yet,” Vincent declared, his tone reminding me of a

teacher explaining something carefully to a student.

“I... I understand,” I forced out as I struggled with my emotions.

The corner of Vincent’s mouth twitched slightly as his eyes flared, “Thank you. I knew you would get it. I just need time to sort things out.”

“What things?” I asked, determined to avoid making the same mistake of not asking this time.

“My family, for one. They are-”

Vincent’s door banged open, the loud noise making me shriek. Vincent stood up as Lucas, drenched and breathless, entered the room.

“I’m here,” he panted, “fuck me, you just had to live on the top floor, didn’t you,” he muttered before pulling himself up.

Lucas Apollo Moore, my other circle member, was completely drenched, his usually bright blonde hair now dark from the rain. He shivered as he stood before us, his clothes heavy with water. His ocean blue eyes locked onto mine, filled with longing an expression that immobilized me on the bed. It felt like years since I had run away from him in the music room a few hours ago. I had thought he loved someone outside our circle, but he loved someone within it. He just didn’t tell me.

*Why?*

“I told her.” Vincent interrupted, sitting beside me again, his knee brushing mine.

“You told her?” Lucas frowned, his eyes narrowing on Vincent. I could feel the tension between them.

“We had come to an understanding to keep things private,” Vincent said, meeting Lucas’s gaze. The air stilled. The storm outside seemed to as if it wanted to listen in. Lucas’s flame inside me dwindled before it reignited as he looked at me and smiled.

“I’m sorry, Guppy. I wanted to tell you, practically begged Vincent.” Lucas said.

“You both lied,” I cut in, causing Lucas to flinch.

“I told you, Grace, I wasn’t and still am not ready,” Vincent added, his hands clenched tightly on the bedsheet as if holding himself down.

“I still had a right to know.” The shock was wearing off now that both of them were in the room. I pointed at Lucas, “You made me believe you were with someone else.”

Lucas shook his head frantically before dropping to his knees and crawling closer, making his way between my legs. He grasped my hands with his own, making me feel the heat he produced. “I promised Vincent. But I wanted to tell you. I kept hinting. I said to you, only our circle, no one else.”

“If you’re angry, blame me, Grace,” Vincent said, touching my arm with his cold hand.

Both their tattoos of koi fish were close. If they placed their arms together, they would form a circle. One shimmering gray, the other gleaming gold, chasing each other.

“I made him promise, and he hated every moment of it. Hated me for a bit for keeping it from you,” Vincent continued before his hand slipped, his pinkie skimming Lucas’s wrist, but in a blink, his hand was gone from both of us.

Lucas nodded, agreeing with Vincent’s words, but his blue eyes were only on me. “It ate me alive, Guppy.”

I huffed, pulling away from his heated touch. “Obviously, not eating at you too much. You had fun at the party.”

My voice was bitter, and God damn it, I was. Confusion and anger at them both were coming forward, growing hotter as I recalled Lucas’s pleasure while he and Vincent were together. While I was downstairs, unaware of it all until I felt Lucas.

I couldn’t stop the emotional tide I was experiencing. I felt relieved Lucas didn’t cheat, but I felt stupid for not seeing.

Lucas winced. His mouth crumpled like he recoiled from the hurtful memory.

“That, you can blame him for,” Vincent growled, glaring at Lucas. “I didn’t even know you were at the party till you were in front of me,” he said in a matter-of-fact tone, like me not being there would have made this better.

“What?” I raised my voice above a whisper, taking in what Vincent had just said.

Lucas looked a little sheepish, looking down, reaching for my hands again to play with my fingers.

“I wanted you to know,” Lucas mumbled, giving me an injured puppy look before he looked at the ground again. “I

thought if you caught us, he would have no choice but to tell you. I didn't want to lie anymore."

"You knew I could feel your pleasure," I said bleakly, not knowing what to think or feel.

*Lucas had planned for that night to happen...*

Lucas hesitated but nodded, "I never wanted to hurt you." He gave me a look of determination, "Never."

"You must have known it would hurt me?" I pulled away again, needing a certain distance as my mind tried to come to a reaction, but it was simmering with overwhelming emotions.

I had just found another circle member, and I was starting to feel the fatigue effect it gave.

"I wasn't thinking," Lucas said in a rush. A type of frantic glint was in his eye as he tried to inch closer to me.

"Selfish," Vincent snapped, eyes hardened and scowling at Lucas on the floor between our feet. Vincent's jaw jumped while his fist clenched; he wasn't happy with Lucas's attempt at exposing them. "You were selfish."

Lucas quickly jumped up, putting his finger in Vincent's face. "So are you!"

The sight of them made my head flicker from all the other times they fought. How I thought they hated each other. They say love and hate are two sides of the same coin...

Frustration and hot bubbling anger coursed through me, making me jump up along with them.

“You both are!” It was my turn to snap. I openly glared at them both, throwing my confusion to the side. I allowed myself to be angry at the two who were dictating my life without my knowledge. “You should have never placed me in that situation!” I shouted at the guilty-looking Lucas, who looked away from me.

I then turned to a stoic Vincent, “You should have told me. Of course, I would have never forced you into something you didn’t want, but you should have said something. Anything would have been better than the lies.”

Vincent flickered his eyes away from mine, his mouth firm, shoving his hands deep in his pocket like a child, “I’ve apologized.”

I felt the need to shake my head as a snort came out. Vincent looked disdainfully at me like his apology was good enough for anything. Yet, despite all that has been said, he still acted like nothing could touch him. Even with the advantage of our bond, Vincent held the control I envied.

“But why did you hide this? You should have known I would never force anything.” I asked again. I needed to know why he felt overwhelmed. Maybe we could help.

“My family, they have a certain expectation of me...and my future circle. I don’t want that for any of us right now. Not while we are still in school.”

Lucas huffed, shaking his head while he shuffled a little making the balls of his feet rub against the soft nylon bristle.



His usual colorful pattern baggy pants were still damp, barely clinging onto his hips as they sagged down.

“I’ll tell you this, Guppy. Vincent here is as rigid as they come and is ours to deal with now.” Lucas said as his hand traveled into his deep pockets, pulling out a blunt already made. Then, with a careless sigh, he placed it between his lips. But Vincent coiled as he spoke, zoning in on the blunt before he stepped into Lucas’s space.

“What have I told you about this?” Vincent said with a hiss as he jolted the blunt out of Lucas’s lips, which now held a smug look.

“Can’t remember. Remind me again.” Lucas replied with an easy swagger that matched his smile.

Vincent’s scowl deepened, and it looked like he was about to lecture Lucas, but his eyes gradually went to me, halting his speech.

It was then apparent that these two knew each other. They had been together and had been having a private life. But, I couldn’t help but wonder, how long had they known each other?

“How long have you known each other?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

“A while,” Vincent said, his tone cold and unyielding. He stood tall, his arms crossed over his chest like a fortress.

A loud crackle outside made Lucas, and I jump. The thunder was gradually leaving, and the light in the window

dimmed as darkness slowly approached. Unfortunately, the heavy rain showed no signs of stopping.

“It’s getting late. We should take you home,” Vincent said, dropping the blunt on his desk without a care for whether someone would find it.

“But I’m still confused,” I snapped, crossing my arms. I couldn’t shake off the anger and disappointment gnawing at my heels. I couldn’t let this conversation end yet. I had too many questions.

“The bonding fatigue is going to hit us soon,” Vincent said, the ever-know-it-all starting to get on my nerves. Perhaps Lucas was right to be annoyed with him.

“But I have questions,” I said.

“Like what?” Vincent asked, his voice cold. He stared unblinking at me, waiting for me to ask.

I felt hot under his gaze as I wracked my brain for a question. But my mind was blank, like my thoughts themselves ran away from Vincent’s stare.

“Were you ever going to tell me?” I asked, my voice trembling with emotion while I twisted my hands together. Lucas’s arm came around me, holding me, and I felt a sense of security.

Vincent nodded, his eyes softening just a fraction. “Eventually. My plans moved forward, but I think we can make it work.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw Lucas shake his head and whisper, “Asshole.”

Vincent looked confused as he looked back and forth between Lucas and me, “I’m sorry if my answer was disappointing, but it’s the truth,” Vincent said.

I felt another pang of pain in my chest.

“Just stop talking, man,” Lucas snapped, pushing Vincent back a little before turning to me. “Grace, none of us wanted to hurt you.” his blue eyes implored me to understand.

But I couldn’t understand. Not yet. The hurt and betrayal were too fresh, too raw. Maybe Vincent was onto something about me leaving. “I need to go,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. “I need to think.”

But I still sat here, unable to make the first move.

Lucas grabbed the car keys from Vincent’s hand and smiled at me as he approached. He caged me in, hands rubbing against my thighs in a small circular motion. The sensation brought a blazing heat as if he were touching my bare skin. Both Vincent and I watched in a moment of pause, with Vincent’s gray eyes watching until he released a huff and shook himself. “I don’t trust you driving my car,” Vincent said.

“I’m a perfectly good driver,” Lucas grinned, helping me to stand.

“I’m sure your vehicle would say otherwise,” Vincent muttered under his breath. I had seen Lucas’s car with the

dents and scratches. I would have agreed with Vincent if I had a car like his. Clean, sleek, and purring perfectly, unlike mine and Lucas's cars.

"I'm coming with you guys," Vincent said as he strode to his closet. I tried to avoid looking, but my eyes instantly latched onto his skin as he pulled a hoodie over his head.

"Fine," Lucas sighed, lingering at the exposed part of Vincent's stomach. His eyes glimmered, and his tongue dipped out slowly, trailing over his metal hoop piercing. His pleasure throbbed between us, and I sent him a glare. He wasn't helping with my emotional state, and by the smirk growing on his lips, he knew it too. I needed to think, to breathe on my own, and decide if I was going to laugh, cry, or scream.

Vincent passed by me and dropped a thick hoodie on my lap. "We best take her home quickly before we sleep," he said, collecting things from his desk. His body became tense as he inhaled long before his shoulder slumped. He even controls his yawns, I thought.

"What happens now?" I asked as I put the hoodie over my head.

"Nothing. We are going back to how things were," Vincent answered, straightening items on his shelf and desk.

"My parents-"

"Can't know."

I frowned, not liking how this was going. "You want me to lie to them?"

“It won’t be a lie if you say nothing,” Vincent said, pushing his glasses up.

“Where have I heard that before,” Lucas muttered from behind me.

Vincent huffed, “You said you understood.”

“I do, but it doesn’t mean I like it,” I snapped, leaving the door. Vincent cursed under his breath as I passed.

I knew more, yet still nothing. My mind was swirling with questions, but fatigue hit me hard, causing me to sway in the halls.

“Whoa, Guppy,” Lucas caught me, steadying me as we walked. “Take it easy.”

“She should have gone home sooner,” Vincent grumbled, striding past us towards the staircase. He looked determined and focused. “What are you going to tell her parents?”

“I’ll mention that she caught something,” Lucas muttered, supporting me as we walked.

I couldn’t stifle another yawn as Vincent struggled with one of his own. All I wanted was to sleep.

“Good, it will give her time to rest,” Vincent said.

“I don’t want to lie,” I mumbled, my mind feeling hazy and my body heavy.

“Don’t worry,” Lucas said gently before sweeping me into his arms. He carried me bridal style as we made our way to

Vincent's car. The rain was coming down hard, but Lucas tried to shield my face as Vincent opened the back door of his car.

I was squeezed into the backseat, which was tight and cozy. The warmth enveloped me, and I closed my eyes for a moment. Then, two doors slammed, and the engine came to life. We were further along than I realized when I opened my eyes.

"How long have you both known each other?" I asked again. I needed to know at least something. I was willing to fight for it but my eyes were too heavy to keep open. It was Vincent who answered.

"A few years now," he muttered, causing me to open my eyes and look at both of them in the front seat. Lucas' shoulders were tense, and he sent a quick, grief-stricken glance Vincent's way. It felt suffocating, like thick smoke filling my lungs with every breath.

"Will you tell me how you found each other?" I asked, my words slurring with fatigue.

"One day, Guppy." Lucas' voice was soft and far away, but I knew he was driving.

"Will we be okay?" I asked, hopeful but uncertain.

"Everything will be okay, Grace," Vincent reassured me, but it felt like a goodbye.

I wanted to ask more, to express my concern for both of them, but my mind was too foggy to form the words. Lucas' gentle warmth was comforting me, lulling me to sleep. I

reached out for Vincent, needing to feel him, but was met with coldness and emptiness.

Was this the beginning of the end for us?

## CHAPTER TWO

### GRACE

**F**or two days, I slept. I was in a constant state of exhaustion and had no concept of time. I was just thankful that I knew it was Wednesday, but besides that, I had no idea what was happening to me. It was the first day I had been awake for longer than an hour. I had no energy to do anything; getting out of bed felt like climbing a mountain, and even eating was a struggle. Doing anything besides sleeping seemed like too much to ask at the moment.

Fatigue was my new companion.

But today, I was awake, and I wasn't sure if I was happy about that. Part of me was glad that I was turning things around. My parents were threatening to take me to see a doctor if I didn't recover from my 'illness' this week. The other part of me wanted to sleep. If I could sleep forever, I could avoid my parents. Lucas had said or done something that made every single one of them insane. They hovered around like bees, buzzing and waiting for me to recover.



They weren't stupid. They knew something had happened, and the longer I lay in bed, the more their suspicions would ramp up, and they would start to come up with their own ideas.

I didn't know why I needed to lie to them. They didn't know Vincent's parents, so who would they tell? But Vincent wasn't ready, so I needed to do this for him. But the thought of lying to my concerned parents seemed wrong. They were worried, and I was putting on a brave face because I was also...

When I found Lucas, it didn't feel nearly as exhausting as it does now, nor did I struggle as much to stay awake.

It made me question if something was wrong.

The bond between Vincent and me felt strained and jagged, like a piece that was meant to fit easily but couldn't because something was blocking it from connecting naturally. I knew it was Vincent's block, but I had no idea what to do. I couldn't communicate with him mentally or physically, as I had no way to contact him. I didn't have his number and was back asleep when Lucas visited.

I wanted to know why he felt the need to block the bond. It felt wrong, hollow, like a missing part.

In the short time I was awake, I spent online, deep diving into researching unhealthy bond symptoms. Of course, the internet was a void I shouldn't have looked at, but what other choice did I have? I couldn't just ask my parents. The first result I got was an article about bond-fading illnesses. The

result sent me into a wave of panic as I read about things that I didn't know could happen in the first place.

*“On rare occasions, circle members can weaken the bond, causing symptoms such as restlessness, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, irritability, and sometimes an inability to feel certain emotions. Even though a bond is unbreakable, if not resolved, it can lead to irreparable fractures in the bond.”*

I slammed my laptop down.

Nope.

That was a bad idea. Now I couldn't stop thinking about the possibility of damaging my bond. Why wasn't I warned about this before? How could they allow people to go out into the world without this knowledge?

It wasn't my first time researching specific questions. I even searched for people who experienced a situation where circle members wanted to hide rather than embrace their circle, but nothing came up. Instead, all the stories were good, sickly-sweet stories where nothing went wrong.

All lies, I was sure.

I couldn't be the first person to be in this situation.

Vincent's words about his family's expectations of him and his circle came back to me, but he couldn't be the first. There were expectations everywhere when it came to yourself and circle members. But no one wanted to share those online or even talk about it. Talking about the rough side of finding your circle felt like a big taboo in the online community. I didn't

realize how much work my mother was up against as I normally avoided circle topics.

I just wanted to help Vincent and didn't want to add to that pressure on him. But how could I help when I didn't know where to start?

Palming my eyes, I groaned at the feel-good pressure, like a stretch with a bit of pain but easing the tension. I didn't know how tense they were till now.

Warmth flooded through me like a blanket of comfort and security, making me relax deeper into my bed. I cherished Lucas's spirit inside me, loving his playful nature and the kindled flame that represented him. It felt strong and bright.

Lucas had been around, visiting at odd hours the past few days. I knew when he had been here, leaving sweets and small notes on my bedside table.

It was always a nice surprise to see them when I woke up.

His handwriting was bold, with block letters that stood out against the white paper. Each note demanded my attention, and I was happy to give it. It was becoming our little way of communicating sweet nothings.

**GET BETTER GUPPY!**

The first ones were sweet, but the latest one I woke up to was a little odd...

**IF THIS IS GOING TO BE AN ONGOING THING. I'M GOING TO INVEST IN A NURSE OUTFIT.**

It made me giggle at his absurdity.

I really needed to recover if this was Lucas's way of compelling me to get better. But, thanks to both his methods and soul, I had to admit it was working. Every time I woke, he was there, fueling me with energy. It was after my first research on bonds that I found out that bonds can give a spike of energy, similar to a small dose of caffeine, healing from within.

There were other claims about what bonds can do, which scientists worldwide were further researching. However, it was difficult to gather information as no one likes to talk about their bond with anyone outside of their circle. Even I struggled to talk about it with my curious friends. So it was mainly up to scientists and researchers who have found their own circles to make progress.

A knock came on my door before it opened, and my mother peeked her head in. When she saw me sitting up in bed, her smile brightened.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, entering the room followed by the rest of my family.

Father, still in his work suit, was right behind mother. His scrutinizing dark eyes took me, and I didn't need to be a genius to know he was thinking of the worst at this point. Daddy hurried along holding a steaming cup of what smelt like hot chocolate and placing it right on my bedside table.

All five of them surrounded me.

“Better,” I answered truthfully. I felt more aware and alert if I ignored my soul’s hidden tension. I felt fine, just fine.

“You still don’t look right,” Daddy said, his mouth set in a firm line, disappointed in my appearance. He exchanged a look with the others, communicating in secret. Finally, Papa came to my side, placing his cool palm on my forehead.

“I’m fine,” I tried not to cringe at my tone. I couldn’t even lie to myself, and by the looks on my parent’s faces, I couldn’t lie to them either. I sent an annoyed strike down Lucas’s bond while Vincent’s was like a racket, hitting my ball of emotions back at me. It only frustrated me more.

“I’m ready to go back to school,” I said confidently. I was ready to leave the house and return to normal, but I knew nothing would be the same now that I knew what Vincent meant to me.

“Let’s see how you are today first,” Mother said hesitantly, glancing at my dads’ before taking a deep breath. Oh no, I thought. This was it. Now that I was awake, they were going to question me.

My parents stood across from me, their expressions expectant. “We just wanted to ask you a few questions,” my mother said.

“I didn’t do drugs or have alcohol,” I blurted out before they could ask. My sudden outburst seemed to have worked as all of my parents paused. My mother’s green eyes twinkled with amusement before she shook her head.

“Okay, the other thing we wanted to know is -” Papa began but was interrupted by Father.

“Are you pregnant?” he asked abruptly, causing my heart to race and my breath to catch in my throat.

“Way to ease into that question,” Da mumbled under his breath, but I could still hear it as no one else spoke. The room was so silent that I could hear a pin drop as all five of my parents waited with bated breath for my answer.

I realized I had left them without an answer for too long, and my guilt twisted inside me. I didn’t want to hurt them, but I didn’t want to lie to them.

A sharp electric bolt went right through me, causing air to flow back into my lungs again. Vincent was quick, but I felt him, even if it was for just half a second.

“No, I’m not... that,” I forced myself to say, my voice barely above a whisper.

I could feel the weight of their doubt and knew they suspected I was hiding something. The guilt gnawed at me, making my stomach churn. I couldn’t look them in the eye. My eyes were glued to the floor.

“Are you sure?” Papa asked, leaning forward. They all were leaning forward, waiting for my reassurance.

“I’m sure.”

“We can get you a test if you want?” Mother reassured me, causing me to shout.

“Ma!” I yelled, trying to stop what was happening. My face probably looked like the inside of a beet. “I’m not... I... We haven’t.”

Mother’s slim blonde eyebrows nearly flew off her face as they shot up. “Okay, okay!”

“O-kay,” Da said, drawing out the word slowly before he clapped his hands together, rubbing them. “So, no drugs, alcohol, or pregnancy. We checked all the main three. So now our parent intervention stops here.”

Father huffed while his eyes narrowed at me. I could see the calculations in his glinting eyes, like he was trying to figure me out. But I couldn’t look him in the eye. Otherwise, he would know.

“I just felt off,” I offered weakly, trying to deflect their suspicions. “Starting school and finding Lucas, it’s been a lot to take in.”

“You’ve had a lot going on,” Mother acknowledged with a nod while Daddy and Da exchanged a worried glance.

“You need more time to take it easy, Kiddo,” Da consoled me, his voice filled with concern. “Don’t overwork yourself. We don’t like seeing you like this.”

“You should sleep more,” Daddy added, coming over to tuck me in. “You look better, but not fully. So sleep, and I will get dinner ready.”

“Are you sure you’re not pregnant?” Father asked again, arms crossed, not leaving my bedside with a look of suspicion

on his face.

“Tobias, Grace has told us she isn’t,” Mother chimed in, trying to diffuse the tension in the room. She gave my shoulder a reassuring rub as she got up from my bed. “She wouldn’t lie to us,” she added with a smile, pulling him out of the room, following my other parents.

As soon as the door closed, I slumped into my pillow, face first, wishing I could disappear. My face felt tight and hot, my mind a jumbled mess of emotions. I was the worst daughter on the planet, and the guilt consumed me as I lay there, wishing for a way to make it right.



Even after my assurances that I was perfectly fine, my parents thought it was best for me to have one more day off from school. It was Thursday morning, and only Da and I were in the house.

We were in the kitchen. Da currently had most of his upper body deep under the kitchen sink. Which he thought was draining too slowly for his liking. I didn’t know why he thought a newly built house would already have issues. Every now and then, banging followed by some curses came from under the sink.

Father was right. Da was bored.

I was at our breakfast table, watching the morning news on the small kitchen TV while trying my hardest to not fall asleep. I was proud of myself for being awake this long. But I



had to secretly admit that I could easily settle down and fall sleep, much to my frustration.

But I really wanted to watch till the end of the debate that was currently going on. Today the country wanted to switch things up and ignore the Mundane discussion on their rising riots for freedom to talk about how a circle should be.

*“We need to stop thinking we own our circle members! That way of thinking does more harm than good!”* One of the reformists spoke, trying to push forward a new way of thinking, but that itself was an uphill battle.

*‘Holding these expectations in our circles is only placing them on this high pedestal.’* She continued only for the other woman, a traditionalist, to interrupt with her mocking laugh.

*‘All circles are great blessings! But, of course, they should be held high in everyone’s regard. To think of them as anything but is disrespectful!’*

The debate made me think of my own insecurities and jealousy.

Lucas’s past was one of them. Everyone at school knew who he was, and so did the town folks. Unfortunately, Lucas’s reputation for sleeping around had brought other people, who had found their circle members, a load of anger and bitterness. I was hoping Vincent’s past wasn’t as bad.

*They didn’t know you then,* I reminded myself, but it wasn’t enough to rid the sour taste in my mouth.

I obviously needed to work on it. To overcome my own issues. Because what else could I do? I couldn't change the past, especially one where I wasn't even present.

The more I thought about it, the more sure I was that the stab of bitter betrayal I felt at the party was more painful than that of their past activities.

Was that the way forward? Comparing past negatives to present ones?

*'My circle each holds a part of me inside them, and I hold them in return. It's a bond, a unity, and a connection that is the most beautiful thing in this world.'* The traditionalist woman received loud applause as the live viewers yelled in agreement. Even the presenter was nodding along.

With the people backing her, she continued with a bigger upbeat, *'We own each other, and it needs to be nurtured from the start. Allowing yourself to explore outside of your circle does everyone harm. It's the seed of a plague that can shatter the very core of a circle. We must lead our children on a stricter path. The right path!'*

The live audience only grew louder, which made it harder for the reformist to push back, *'I agree that new circles should be nurtured and grow on their own, but we all have free will. Free will to grow for ourselves, to experience things. We cannot learn if we restrict ourselves too much.'*

*'And you can do that with your circle,'* the traditionalist said smugly, casting a knowing look toward the presenter. *'But*

*please, do tell us, does your circle have any issues caused by one of your members' past?'*

*'That's irrelevant,' the reformist snapped. 'That has nothing to do with our debate.'*

*'It has everything to do with it,' the traditionalist retorted. 'I'm sure with your forward-thinking ideals, you would lead the way in admitting your or your circle members' faults?'*

*'I didn't come here to talk about my own circle,' the reformist said firmly. 'I came here to talk about letting go of your expectations.'*

The presenter jumped in, *'Please, Mrs. Fisher. We all would like you to answer the question.'* The crowd erupted in demands, and I could see the reformist's face pale as she tried to suppress her shudder. The camera zoomed in, catching her discomfort.

*Was she about to admit her circle's imperfections?*

I was on the edge of my seat, waiting with bated breath. I knew that either way, the traditionalist side had won the audience. She had gotten what she wanted, as evidenced by her smug smile.

But if the reformist could admit that her circle wasn't perfect, it would be a giant leap. I was sure thousands of people needed to hear that it was okay not to be perfect. I sure did.

*'My circle and I have never had any issues on this matter,'* the reformist said finally, as boos and cheers erupted from the

crowd.

I slumped, feeling the weight of disappointment. A childish part of me wanted to throw my leftover breakfast scraps at the TV.

The reformist had her chance, but she couldn't take it. She reminded me of my mother in a way. Both were determined and passionate about making a change but were often met with resistance and cynicism. Her attempts at pushing for progressive policies were met with an onslaught of criticism. But both of them were trying to keep the facade that they were perfect because one mistake, and the traditional thinkers pounced on it like wolves.

Nothing would change unless people could just admit their faults.

Still, the disappointment felt heavy, and I quickly turned off the TV as the traditionalist started her taunt.

The ring of the doorbell echoed throughout the house.

“Could you get that, kiddo?” my dad shouted, his head still deep under the sink.

Jumping off the stool, I went to the front door. I half-expected it to be Julia. She had been spamming my phone throughout the days I had been absent. But I was disappointed when a boy I'd never seen smiled down at me when I opened the door.

He appeared to be around the same age as me, but his baby face made him look a bit younger. If there was a competition

for a cheery and borderline creepy smile as this guy's, he'd win, hands down. It just looked too fake to be genuine.

He snapped his shoulders upright and pushed out his chest when I opened the door. The action made his white button-up dress shirt look even tighter. The shirt looked choking as all the buttons were done up right to the top. It didn't help that he also wore a tie, a long straight black fabric with a small golden embroidered pattern of circles. His attire was well put together, reminding me of Vincent, but this guy felt too polished and too perfect.

While Vincent had black push-back hair, this guy had a light chestnut brown comb-over covered in a thick layer of wax. This guy seemed too chipper and full of enthusiasm.

He was definitely a morning person.

“Good morning, Miss,” he spoke in a singsong manner.

“I was wondering if I could have a moment of your time?” he asked, still smiling, flashing his teeth. A cold wind whipped around us, flapping my baggy clothes and hair, while he didn't seem to notice.

Then I noticed the clip of a name tag on the left side of his chest. In thick, shiny gold letters, ‘Andrew’ was written.

“We are not interested in buying anything,” I spoke the familiar words I heard my parents say when people came selling things. It was best to be polite but firm. Otherwise, you may end up paying for a subscription you didn't need, like

when Da accidentally signed up for a monthly magazine delivery when he couldn't say no.

Andrew let out a chuckle. "I'm not here to sell anything. In fact, I've been sent from your school." Warning bells sounded in my head as I tried to understand why this man was here. I was certain I had never seen him before. My expression must have conveyed my fear as he raised his hands in surrender.

"Don't worry, nothing bad. You haven't done anything wrong," he said quickly, looking uneasy. He straightened his tie and took a deep breath. "I'm the new school missionary. My name is Andrew. I've been told you've recently found one of your circle members." He bent down, pulling out a slim folder from a brown leather bag I hadn't noticed before.

I couldn't believe they knew about Vincent. Of course, no one could know unless one of us had said something. Had I said something that made my parents question me again?

"To Lucas Apollo Moore, correct?" Andrew asked, looking up from the folder he had just read from.

Relief washed over me. "Y-yes," I croaked, fighting back the urge to cough.

Andrew's smile widened, making me slightly uneasy. He couldn't possibly be this happy all the time. It would be exhausting.

"Congratulations. It's a blessing to have found one. Unfortunately, not many ever find their circle, so you must be

blessed by fate,” he said excitedly. His tone was genuinely happy.

“Erm, thank you,” I said hesitantly, still wondering why he was here.

Andrew seemed flustered as the folder slipped from his hands, scattering papers on the ground. “Snickerdoodle! I’m sorry, one second,” he muttered, quickly picking up the flyers.

“Who is it, kiddo?” Da’s voice came from behind me.

Andrew stood up, his demeanor changing as he spotted him. Finally, he straightened up and put on a forced smile. “Good morning, sir! My name is Andrew, and I’m the school’s missionary,” he said easily. “I’m making rounds to newly found circle members, and your daughter is my first.”

Da looked skeptical. “You look quite young to be the school’s missionary,” he said slowly. His large frame filled the doorframe, making it impossible for me to slip away and leave him alone with our guest.

“Oh, yes. The school board believes a new missionary should be close in age to those they speak to.” Andrew explained, breaking the awkward silence.

My Da looked uncertain, but Andrew seemed to remember the purpose of his visit. “I only came here to introduce myself and hand out information flyers about bond life and what to expect,” he said, pulling a stack of glossy papers from his bag.

“Wait, do you have flyers about bond health?” I asked impulsively, trying to ignore my dad’s concerned expression.

“I do, along with others,” Andrew said, handing me the flyers. My eyes fell on one with the title, *‘Preparing for the perfect circle family?’* I groaned mentally. The universe must hate me.

Andrew continued, “I’ll be giving some talks at school next week about the Sacred Circle Community and why everyone should join our family.”

The Sacred Circle Community, or SCC, was one of the fastest-growing religious communities in the country. While there were other religious communities, the SCC was the one I had seen and heard the most about on the news. They had strict, traditionalist views on circle standards and were against mundane and outside circle fornication. They believed that going against the circle would be a damnation of one’s soul and would corrupt one’s circle members in the process.

It wasn’t surprising to know that my school followed SCC rules. I was sure I had read somewhere that the founder of my school was an SCC member.

Was this happy-go-lucky guy really a hater of mundane?

“I did try to get in contact with Mr. Moore first. It’s an etiquette procedure to introduce myself to the oldest of the circle, but I’ve been unable to get a hold of him,” Andrew said with a frown and a blush of embarrassment. “I apologize immensely, of course. I was hoping you could help me get in contact with him? I would like to be introduced to everyone before Monday.”



“Not a problem at all!” My Da said with a grin, handing Andrew Lucas’s address and hinting for him to go see him after school.

But I couldn’t shake the feeling that my Da was sending Andrew into a dangerous situation. Lucas was known for being a tough character to deal with, and I didn’t want Andrew to be caught off guard. But before I could say anything, Andrew said goodbye and left.

“Well, that was interesting,” Da said casually as we returned inside. My mind was still on the flyers in my hand.

### **Steps to a healthy Circle.**

#### **Strive for Perfection!**

#### **Want to be a good Circle Member?**

#### **Why you should follow the SCC way!**

My throat felt thick as I read through the flyers, each bringing a new layer of pressure. There was so much information that it made me feel a little overwhelmed. But maybe, these flyers were the key to helping me help my circle.

“Kiddo?” Da’s voice was soft as he stroked my back with his rough palms, providing a comforting touch.

“What is the right way?” I asked, hoping he understood what I was truly asking.

Da’s eyes crinkled as he looked down at me. “Come here,” he said, leading me into the living room and forcing me to sit. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

I struggled to take a satisfying breath. “I...I want to be good enough for my circle. I feel lost. I didn’t know there was so much to it...” I couldn’t help but look back down, reading the titles again. But Da’s large palm held my cheek, bringing my head back up.

“You are good enough, Kiddo,” he said confidently. He removed his hand and looked down at the flyers, tapping them. “These are just suggestions. Nothing in what they say might be right for you.”

“So, I shouldn’t listen to what they say?” I asked, confused.

“All I’m saying is that you should believe what you think is right. Nothing in this world is black and white. It’s gray. You should definitely look these over. I’m sure the things they say will have you agreeing on some things and disagreeing on others.”

“And that’s...okay?”

“That is more than okay. In my opinion, you don’t need to think about this yet. People get wrapped up in these things. They think something is wrong because they think their bond isn’t perfect. But that is okay. You and Apollo have a bond, and I am sure it’s unique. No one else in the world would feel the same way. When you find the other three, they will feel different too.”

“What if it feels...” I couldn’t say it out loud. My whole body recoiled at the thought of speaking it. It made me feel nauseous just at my attempt to speak it. It was just wrong, too private.

Da seemed to understand as he nodded, and his cheeks started to pale. He swallowed tightly before he spoke, “I get what you’re trying to say. All I can say is that to feel better about this, you have to be open and honest. I know it’s scary, but sometimes you have to take that leap.”

I was so grateful to have Da at this moment. He understood. I knew he did. Even if he couldn’t say it aloud, I knew he had experienced the same thing. It was hard to ask him for follow-up questions and explanations. I couldn’t say that it wasn’t me that was blocking the bond. But I didn’t really need to.

Da’s words were the push I needed. I had to get Vincent to open the bond before it was too late.

## CHAPTER THREE

### LUCAS

*“Just do it!” My voice was a strained grunt as I dangled from the hook I was hanging from. The tight rope burned and squeezed my wrists to the point where I couldn’t feel them anymore.*

*I couldn’t move, only swing, while my shoulders ached with tension. They begged me to put them down, but the agony only increased the longer they remained up as if it was my fault.*

*It is your fault. I thought bitterly. Regret made my tongue thick, and my heart felt like it was about to explode as it thumped so fast.*

*I was trapped. There was no way out. This was going to happen.*

*The smell of gasoline overpowered my nose, leaving no room for any other scent. I couldn’t watch. I couldn’t stand the sight of the match being lit, but I heard it. The smooth glide, the crackle of a kindled new flame.*

*A few moments passed, only breathing, one breath in, and then...*

***Pain.***

*“Apollo!”*

My whole body jolted up from my bed, my left leg throbbed with the familiar sense of scorching eruption. I groaned, turning my face into my flat pillow, muffling my sound before I whipped off my bed sheets and checked my burnt, scarred leg to see that it wasn't actually burning again.

My breathing came out in gasps, thick sweat beads pouring down my face as I softly touched the ugly, scarred skin.

Nothing, but you could never see that invisible flame. But I knew it was still there, under my skin. It burned, pulling another grunt out of my lips.

I felt my lips sneer with repulsion as my fingers glided over the lumps and blistered-looking skin. The rugged texture was felt on the soft tips of my fingers, but yet I felt nothing from my leg.

Only the phantom burn.

*So, it's one of these days,* I thought with a hiss as another surge of blistering heat ran up my calf, mocking me with a reminder of the pain from the past.

*Fuck!*

I quickly reached over to my bedside table, where a joint was already waiting for me like a savior. My hands shook as I tried to strike the lighter. The orange flame caught my breath as it flickered.

I hadn't dreamt of that night in a while. It always left me wide awake and alert, gasping for breath, as the past came crashing into the present, bringing the lingering scent of

gasoline and the taste of metal. Even my shoulders ached as if they had been slung up again.

Taking a deep breath, I mentally shook myself and relit my joint. I ignored the trembling of my hands as the familiar, sharp, prickly sensation grew.

*It's not real*, I thought, as I inhaled deeply. With each breath, I held the smoke inside me as long as possible, feeling the burn within and the satisfaction as my shoulders began to ease.

Shifting my left foot, I held back the need to curse as my upper leg felt sensitive and tight. I normally felt nothing there, but when it acted up, I could only remember the feeling of pain. The skin around my ankle had been the worst during recovery.

Even when the fire has been extinguished, people still burn way after.

*But you're not burning now.* My mind happily reminded me that it wasn't the one sending these fucked up signals in the first place.

Finishing my joint, I stubbed it out on my bedside table, ignoring the burnt scorch marks it left on the wood. I pulled myself up, leaning over my outstretched leg and grunting as I stretched my toes towards my torso.

My teeth ached from how tightly I clenched them, but that pain was better than the phantom burn lingering on my skin.

I often wished I had lost my leg entirely, believing it would have been better than the invisible flame that still licked at my

skin. But even then, I knew I would still feel the pain without the physical limb.

As I reached for my phone, I noticed that it was already past midday.

*Shit, there goes another day of school.*

A loud banging on my door startled me, the force causing it to swing open and hit the wall. My room shook, and I could see a new dent from the handle in the drywall. I couldn't even find the energy to care, not when every broken piece in my room resulted from my sister's actions. As she stood in my doorway, with her glare fixed on me, I knew my day was about to take a turn for the worse.

I was well aware that my sister couldn't stand me. The only blood we recognized was our bloodlust for each other. Laura had a thing for sticking her nose in everything I did just to have a snarky remark. Her toxic spew was close to nuclear waste, with the effect of slowly killing me.

My sister stormed into my room, her demanding tone already setting me on edge. "What have you done with it?" she asked, heading straight for my chest of drawers in the wardrobe. Her blonde hair was pulled back tightly in a ponytail, making her face look even more sharp and angular. Her dark blue polo shirt and skirt were neatly tucked in, but it didn't make her any less of a vulturous bitch.

"Fuck off," I muttered as I tried to finish my stretches so I could leave as soon as possible. But, as usual, she ignored me



and continued to rummage through my things, carelessly tossing them aside and making a mess of my room.

There was always something I had supposedly taken from her, and nothing in my room was left untouched when she was in one of her moods. This was one of the reasons I didn't bother cleaning up; why bother when she'd just come back and make a mess again.

I had long ago realized that nothing in this house was truly mine. When we were younger, Christmas and birthday presents would be taken by her without a second thought. I used to give her everything she wanted without any resistance.

Now, I just wanted her to leave me alone. The guilt I felt had made me her whipping boy. I had suffered from her venomous gabs and her sharp pinches along my arms. But it was when she took and ripped up the only picture I had of our mother and me before she died that caused me to snap.

Since then, our battles only grew bloodier. But her temper always allowed her to win, as our dads submitted to her, unable to cope with her anger. I had asked my fathers to stop getting me Christmas and Birthday presents. It was my own little win, something I controlled. I couldn't witness another moment of my dad's sighing and begging me to give Laura my gift just to shut her up and continue this fake peace they wanted.

Whatever Laura was looking for seemed to have left her attention as she stood in the center of my room with her arms crossed and a cocky hip tilt. "I heard you came back late last

night. Dad was miserable when he went to the shop this morning, knowing you were out all night again.”

“Don’t you have a life at all? Why are you so invested in mine?” I gritted my teeth as pain prickled through my knee. Why did she have to enter when I was feeling this way? It was like she knew when I was vulnerable, like a hound that smelled blood.

Laura huffed out a single laugh before shaking her head, her eyes narrowed into slits. “Has your circle member dropped you already? Didn’t take long.”

“Get your fucking pig nose out of my business and my room,” I moved to sit up, bracing for her next attack.

“Why? You don’t pay for anything. You live here for free, mooching off my dad while you smoke and drink all day.” Of course, it was always her dad when she mentioned her biological one, while my biological one was ours. But even with that, she spoke with disgust.

“Might as well soak it all in before it runs dry,” I muttered, seeking out an old top that I’d left on the floor. I needed an escape before things got worse. They always did.

“You’re fucked up if you think I will allow you to tear this family apart more than it is.” Laura spat, taking a step closer while I pulled a shirt on. My body tensed as she glared. I was bigger than her, but she didn’t care about my size. She will still slap me if I let my guard down.

“That’s me, the fuck up.” I learned from a young age to just agree with things being said about me. They could go right ahead believing what they wanted to make me out to be.

“I don’t think she is your circle member.”

*Here we go again.*

Laura’s jealousy of me finding my circle member before her had brought a new, even meaner side than before. It was new ammunition for her to strike against me. Laura used it relentlessly, using my fears against me.

I couldn’t lie and say it wasn’t working.

“You would be fixed if she truly was. Even our dad is disappointed you’re not normal.”

Fixed.

It hurt, and by her smug slimy smile, she knew it also.

“Get the fuck out.” I seethed. My body shook with the need to lash out, to break something, or even better, smack that smile off her face.

“I would say, poor Apollo, but you deserve every bit you get. It will just be a matter of time before she sees how truly messed up you are!” She snarled before storming off and slamming my door hard.

I saw nothing but the raging red before my knuckles erupted in pain. They throbbed from the impact with my wall. A new large dent was now among the others.

My skin scraped, now pooling with hot liquid red, imprinting on the cream walls. Unfortunately, the pain didn't shock me as I roared in rage.

Everything I held was unleashed.

Grace, Vincent, our bond, the need to be fixed, the pull of drowning, my fucking leg!

I hit my left calf hard, longing for something different. A new sensation instead of the burn, but I felt nothing.

A cold shock jolted me, reminding me to breathe out the heat of my anger.

Vincent.

His essence pooled over me, instantly cooling me off. A small gift he didn't often give. I soaked him up as much as I could. Holding him like the raft that I knew he was. I longed to reach out, but I knew he would pull back. He always did. It was mainly him coming to me on his terms.

I need you... I thought longingly, only for him to vanish, leaving me alone in the house of strangers, sinking once again.



Grace was still deep in slumber when I arrived. She was so sound asleep that she didn't even make a sound when I settled down next to her. I could sense her when she awoke at different hours of the day and night. I always felt that building stress that seeped into our bond coming from her. It was only

when she slept that she was at peace. I was just grateful that her worries didn't follow her in her dreams.

Slowly, I climbed into bed behind her, and she instinctively snuggled into me, revealing how much she truly needed me, even in her sleep. I buried my face into her auburn hair as another wave of peace washed over me while I breathed in her floral scent. It was a familiar sensation, along with the emotions she was sensitive to. I could lose myself in our bond and never tire of it. I simply loved sending her emotions and feeling her reactions as they tumbled inside her, echoing her true feelings to me.

Before, her sensitivity to our bond was high. I felt every quiver and every need that I caused her. I felt it in my own soul, and it would always make me swell with a pride I had never experienced before. Now, Grace didn't shiver as much. Perhaps my addiction had normalized our connection. I didn't know for sure, but I still felt the need to consume her. I doubted that this need would ever go away.

Tightening my embrace, her arms felt soft and silky like flower petals. I could spend all day stroking her velvety skin, each stroke of my fingers feeling like a new sensation. Grace moaned slightly, shifting her body towards me, gripping my shirt, and pulling me closer. It was a clear sign that her body and soul needed me, and I happily gave her whatever she needed by snuggling up to her, relishing in any comfort and relief that she could bring me. Our closeness and open connection made our bond hum peacefully as her soft breaths became like loving sighs of true harmony.

I had been craving to hold her like this after the difficult few days we had all been through. The thought that I could have lost her was still in my mind. All because of our lies and how they could have cost me her. The memories of her locking me out, her refusing for our souls to connect, were torturous. I knew I could still lose her, which sent a prickle of fear down my spine. It made my insides freeze with terror that could bring me to my knees, begging her not to leave me. I couldn't lose her.

*If she left...*

I pushed that thought out of my mind and squeezed her tightly, needing to feel every inch of her. It was different with Vincent. As soon as he learned how to shut me out, a part of me couldn't blame him, while another part rattled the bars between us. But I had never experienced an open bond like this before. Grace had brought a piece of me to life when we found each other, only for her to turn it off. I knew it was a punishment for being a selfish fuck.

I could feel her need every time she woke, and it wasn't even directed at me. I felt every desire for Vincent to open their bond. The pain she felt was like a stab to my heart. It just made me want to smack him even more.

I knew the exact moment she woke up. Our bond lit up like a beacon bringing a shot of nerves, hitting me like a punch before they settled back into a calm longing. I loved how loud she was in our connection. The tiniest things could make her send wave after wave of emotions. The bond between her and

me was different, and I loved it. I needed the loudness. I needed the distraction from the silence I was used to. I needed her. Hell, we both did.

How sweet and naive Grace got Vincent and me as circle members, I didn't know. Was she here to save us?

"Hello, Guppy," I whispered in her ear, receiving a small shiver from her that pulled my lips into a smug smile.

Her body turned, allowing her head to burrow into my chest, hiding and mumbling under her breath. I didn't need to see her red cheeks to know she was embarrassed. I couldn't help but rub my nose behind her ear, breathing her in as we soaked each other.

"I'm glad you're here, Lucas." She mumbled while the bond hazed.

She was fighting going off to sleep again. I felt her annoyance when the exhaustion rose, forcing her back into a slumber. A panicked jolt tore through, making us jolt and cling to each other for comfort.

I watched her frown, her eyes barely opening to see me, but when her tired gaze settled on me, my whole body warmed at the smile she gave. Grace's face looked pale, too pale for my liking.

Finding your circle wasn't a walk in the park. It was a total wipeout, but not like this. Her sleeping this long wasn't normal. She should have been more alert by now, but I guess

with Vincent being the stubborn dick that he is, he is probably the cause of Grace's slow recovery.

"Sleep," I whispered, loving again the soft shiver she released. "You're not going to lose me. I'll be here, waiting."

*Forever*, I promised as her brow eased with soothing relief.

Nothing will ever get me to leave her side. If she needed space after the events from the last couple of days, then I would give it to her, but I would never leave her.

I could wait. As long as she would eventually allow me back by her side.

I wasn't stupid. I knew sooner or later, we needed to have the talk. The fight we both had, had left an invisible mark between us. A hidden tension that I knew we both had to face.

I could feel sleep taking over as peace settled in her mind. The tension that had been rising dissipated as her body relaxed.

"I'm sorry. For everything," I whispered to her, feeling like a coward for only saying it now that she was asleep. It was what I had wanted to say since the night of the party.

Vincent's words from our argument echoed in my mind.

*'You were selfish!'*

The truth of his statement weighed heavily on me. The lump in my stomach grew as the memory of our argument hit me like a truck.



*“This is all your fault, Lucas!” Vincent’s voice was filled with anger unlike any I had heard before.*

*“I know,” I replied, feeling suffocated like the walls were closing in on me. But that was ridiculous. We were out by the lake, surrounded by open air and miles of open space.*

*“You couldn’t wait, could you? No, not the great Apollo. Always acting and never thinking.” He spat my middle name with disdain. He only used it when he was truly upset with me.*

*“I wanted-”*

*“You wanted. That’s what it all comes down to, doesn’t it? You wanted Grace to know, regardless of the pain and confusion it could cause.”*

*“I’m sorry,” I croaked, feeling lost and confused. I was falling apart, and it felt like I was losing everything.*

*“You’re only sorry because it didn’t go your way,” he sneered.*

*“Hate me all you want, but Grace needed to know. But I need you right now.”*

*“Hate you,” he scoffed, turning away from me, his arms crossed over his chest as he looked out at the lake.*

*I knew he couldn’t stand to look at me after what I had done. I had tricked him and Grace the previous night, and my plan had backfired spectacularly. Grace had blocked me out, leaving me feeling hollow and alone.*

*“I didn’t mean for it to backfire like that,” I pleaded.*

*“That’s the thing, you don’t think,” he spat. Despite his anger, I could sense his frustration with the situation I had created. He didn’t want Grace to hurt or pull away from me, from us. Without me, he couldn’t even get close to her without causing suspicion.*

*“Call me stupid, an idiot, anything. Hit me if it makes you feel better. But, just please, don’t leave me like this. I know I messed up, but you have to talk to her.”*

*The need to beg for his help was overwhelming. Vincent was the fixer, the one with the mind for it. He had gotten me out of many difficult situations.*

*He could fix this. He had to.*

*If not, maybe I could tell her and explain it was all a misunderstanding? That he was, in fact, our circle member.*

*“You won’t tell her.” He said firmly, probably knowing my train of thought.*

*“Please, Vinny. I need you.”*

*Vincent turned back to the lake, his shoulders stiff, letting the night fill the silence around us. He stood there for a while, and before I felt a daunted feeling he was about to say no, he sighed.*

*“Fine.”*

I could feel the weight of my actions as I sat beside her, watching her sleep. It was my fault that Grace knew the truth now, and it had nearly cost us our trust and bond. But, as much as I regret the pain I caused her, I couldn't bring myself to regret my decision entirely.

I had gotten my way, but I promised I would never harm her again. "I'm so fucking sorry," I whispered to her, tracing my finger over her cheek.

*Selfish!* My mind screamed at me. But I was sorry. I was sorry she had me as a circle member, but nothing could stop my need for her. I was also sorry because there was one more thing I had to confess to.

Her face was crumpled by the disturbance of my finger while she turned away, resettling with a long sigh like a mumble. I continued to watch her as her lips puckered while her slender nose wrinkled. It made me smile. The way she relaxed on her big bed with a tranquil sigh.

A knock on the door interrupted my thoughts. Roger and Graham, the other members of Brenda's circle, peeked their heads in. They looked between Grace and me, concern etched on their faces. They had been worried about her since she started sleeping so much.

I could also feel the tension and unease emanating from Grace's parents. I had only made things worse by telling them she was ill.

All of Grace's parents had been cautious the last few days due to the lie I told. I could have simply said she was asleep, but my big mouth stepped in and said she was ill, making her whole family go up in arms.

*Maybe I just shouldn't talk anymore?*

Or maybe I should blame the one person I was doing this for, fucking, Vincent.

They suspected something was off, and it was only a matter of time before they'd ask me directly.

"Are you staying for dinner, Lucas?" Roger asked, his voice barely above a whisper. They had invited me to stay for dinner every day since I dropped Grace off.

"No, I've got to go," I whispered, untangling myself from Grace.

I couldn't stay. I wasn't good enough. Especially not to have dinner with her parents.

*I don't want to leave her*, I thought, glancing down at her as she snuggled up tightly, causing me to turn green with envy.

*Fuck me, I was jealous of a comforter.* I mentally scoffed at myself while eyeing the bed, wanting to sleep beside her. I wanted to hold her, wrap around her, and never leave.

I haven't slept here yet. While we did share my bed back at my house, the thought of sleeping here was too good to be true. Just imagining sleeping beside her, in a clean home with no rubbish anywhere, and knowing full well that breakfast

would be on the table once we woke up. Nothing would really matter as I could snuggle with Grace, feeling safe.

“I would rather you didn’t,” Graham grumbled when I stepped out of Grace’s bedroom and closed her door with a soft click.

Out of all of Grace’s dads’, I was closest to Graham. His laidback fun attitude was easy to be around. Of course, the man had faults, but he wasn’t as stifling as the others.

“Just be safe in this weather.” Graham muttered, following me down the stairs.

*‘Be safe’* An odd thing to ask.

*When was the last time I heard that?*

I could only nod. What do people say to that? Okay? I’ll try?

I was nearly out the front door when Brenda’s voice stopped me.

“Lucas?”

I couldn’t help but curse in my mind. Brenda hadn’t questioned me yet, but every time I came around, she silently watched me with concern. The lie was already on the tip of my tongue, but Brenda’s green eyes caught mine, holding me in place. I knew that she could pull any information out of me with the right words, and that was a scary thought.

*Time to lie.*

“Brenda.” I smiled and leaned against the foyer wall. The front door was just a few steps behind me, but I doubted anyone could stop Brenda from sniffing out my bullshit.

Graham and Rodger only gave me a sympathetic look before walking silently toward the kitchen, leaving me alone with Brenda.

“Lucas, what is going on with my daughter?” Tobias asked curtly, his steps aiming towards me but stopping beside Brenda.

I couldn’t help but curse again in my mind. These two together were suffocating. I couldn’t understand how Grace had lived with it all these years.

“If you did anything to her,” Tobias’ voice was full of warning, “You’ll regret it.”

I should have felt sympathetic toward their concern for their daughter, but the sick part of me couldn’t handle it. I was sick of being jealous of their perfect family, but at the same time, I hated it. I couldn’t take the attention all five of Grace’s parents were giving me when normally I was ignored.

I forced a wide smile, “Yes, it’s all those druggie drug drugs I’ve been giving her. Give her some time. She’ll recover.” I hated every word, every time it dug into my soul, twisting it into the warped person that people expected me to be.

It took one look, one false tale, and bam! People had a view. Who was I to say otherwise? No one ever believed me.

And by the look on Tobias' face, he saw what he wanted to see. He growled, baring his teeth as he took a step closer. "My daughter has been in and out of sleep, and you're fucking around cracking jokes?"

"It wasn't crack," I teased, trying to come off sweet, but it only turned my stomach. It felt like it was full of sticky, dark tar. Crushing me.

No wonder it was hard to breathe at times.

"Tobias," Brenda whispered, holding onto his arm before he took another step closer. His face was so thunderous that it made me question if he would resort to violence. "It's okay. Go in the kitchen." She ordered him, pushing him away from me.

Tobias hesitated, but the look Brenda gave him stopped him. He sent me another glare before leaving, leaving me alone with her. The worst one out of all of them.

The look Brenda was giving me hurt. It physically hurt. It was full of discomfort that made my eyes unable to hold hers. I sometimes hated her, especially when she looked at me with disappointment. It was her fault she made me feel like this, making me feel bad. I wouldn't feel this way if she just left me alone.

*Why couldn't she avoid me like everybody else?*

But not Brenda Millington. Oh no. Brenda looked at me like I was a frog on the table, and I didn't know if she wanted to dissect or save me.

Perhaps both.

“Lucas, I know that you and Grace have been having some issues,” Brenda said, her voice laced with concern.

“We sorted it,” I snapped out. I could feel the tension rising and forced my body to shake it off as I stood up from the wall.

Did she really think I did this to my circle member? Did she actually think I would allow Grace to get hurt?

Grace did get hurt.

Brenda’s face softened, making her sharp features relax before taking a step towards me, crowding me. With her drawing near, I could remember the hug she gave me when I first came here. I sometimes wished she had never done it, while other times, I longed for it again.

A mother’s hug.

“Lucas, I don’t think you have done anything,” Brenda said, her voice gentle.

Fucking mind reader.

“But I’m here if you ever need to talk.”

I could feel the tension rising in my body, and I forced myself to shake it off as I stood up from the wall. I knew she was trying to help, but every soft gesture and a certain look made me feel like I was backed up in a corner.

“There’s nothing to talk about. Grace and I had an issue, it got fixed. Then she came down with something.” I tried to



keep my tone neutral but couldn't help the annoyance creeping into my voice.

Brenda smiled, one with a glint of pity that coiled my gut tightly. Her head tilted, and you could see her looking into my soul.

I needed to leave before she saw something that felt too raw. "I got to go. I'll be back tomorrow," I spoke hurriedly, turning away from her and practically running away as if my ass was on fire.

I couldn't let Brenda see how truly broken I was, and I couldn't bear the thought of her looking at me with pity or judgment.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### GRACE

I stood in front of the mirror, trying to steady my nerves and remind myself that I could handle whatever lay ahead. My mind was a jumbled mess, filled with prepared lies, my parent's cautious gazes, my friends' questioning, and the possibility of seeing Dylan or confronting Vincent. I wasn't sure which one I wanted to tackle first. When did my life become so chaotic?

"You can do this," I whispered, preparing myself for the day ahead. But even my reflection in the mirror looked unsure.

"Are you talking to yourself?" Lucas' voice came from behind me, filled with amusement. He had come over early in the morning, armed with donuts and coffee to help me stay awake for the day.

He stepped further into the bathroom, coming closer to me. His hands found my hips, and our eyes met in the mirror. Mine were wide with uncertainty, while his were sparkling with mirth.

“You know, talking to yourself is the first step to insanity,” he teased.

I could feel the heat emanating from him, burning into my back through my top. Lucas always seemed to run warm, as if he were soaking up the sun’s rays. With just the slightest touch, he left scorching trails on my skin, and he seemed to get hotter each day. Insanity felt like a mild description of what he could make me feel.

Lucas had always been striking to me, ever since the first time I saw him. His style, a mix of carelessness and confidence, was uniquely him. But today, there was something different, something I couldn’t quite put my finger on. He had been lingering around me more, and I could feel the flame inside me flickering more frequently. I could feel him checking every crevice of my being, lighting me up for all to see. He wanted more. I could sense it. No, he needed it.

The grief he had felt when I blocked him was gone, but it had left a cut that had yet to heal. I could feel it, like a dark shadow, even though he was trying to hide it. If I had known it was him and Vincent at the party... if I had known he was with our circle member... none of us would have gotten hurt.

“Don’t think about it,” Lucas whispered in my ear, bringing me back to the present. I didn’t realize I had closed my eyes until I opened them to see the regret in Lucas’s. The thought left a bitter taste in my mouth, a strong desire to turn back time and make things easier. But I couldn’t change the past, no matter how much I wanted to.

“I never wanted to hurt you,” Lucas spoke sincerely, his voice thick with pain and regret.

His obvious pain only brought my own back. I felt frustration building inside me, overflowing as tears stung my eyes.

I didn’t have to tell him that he had hurt me. Lucas had torn me apart, leaving me confused and questioning things I never thought I would have to. I would have willingly stepped aside if Lucas had wanted someone outside of our circle, even after all the lies he had told.

“Why?” I asked thickly, my throat constricting around the word.

Lucas shook his head, his eyes downcast. “I felt so desperate. I didn’t want to lie to you. I hated it. So fucking much.”

His fingers dug into me like small anchors as we both struggled with our emotions. “He wouldn’t budge,” Lucas spat, his anger bubbling up again. “I hated him for it. You weren’t stupid. I could feel you questioning, you left it, but I just couldn’t.”

He closed his eyes as pain and guilt washed over him.

“We both agreed not to be with each other since I found you. He didn’t want to risk it, but that night, at the party. I got you in without him noticing, and I convinced him to have some fun. It’s easy to get Vincent to snap. I know what makes him tick, and he fell for it.” His voice was low, filled with

shame and embarrassment for the plan he had thought was great.

My bathroom was heavy with a growing silence, making Lucas and I stare at each other. We didn't need words between us. We already had an understanding. I knew his feelings, and he knew mine. We were left with the pain of his actions, and nothing could change that.

"I am so sorry, Grace," Lucas said as he stepped closer, his chest pressing against my back. I could feel his entire length and heat. "I'm so fucking sorry. I was selfish in my need, and I hurt you," he said, shaking his head. I could feel the suffocating smoke of self-hatred clinging to him.

"I'm so sorry. Never again, Grace. I promise I will never do it again," Lucas said, opening our bond. It stretched between us with a gleeful hum. Our breaths became parallel, bringing a rush of euphoria as our emotions became one.

I knew his truth at that moment, a pure and honest apology for hurting me. He never wanted to cause me pain, only for me to know the secret that was killing him. But he couldn't withhold the glee of me finally knowing, nor could he hide the lingering sense of worry that I would push him out again.

It did make me feel a little better, with a twist of sharp guilt, that he was hurting. His forehead then settled onto my shoulder as he continued to hold me. I was his anchor at that moment, and I saw him dangling over the abyss that wanted to swallow him whole. I had the power to help him at that moment, or I could let him fall.

“I know,” I whispered, leaning back into him, needing his support, which he happily gave. His sense of relief at my need for him bloomed. “It has been a lot, and I just want to move on.”

I was angry and hurt by his actions. The betrayal I had felt was real to me at the time. But I didn't want lies to be the foundation of our circle. I would rather have them tell me they could not answer my questions than have them lie to me.

But, feeling Lucas face his regret was painful. I could feel the echo of his desperation from that night before I shut him out - the panic and feeling of entrapment. What else could I do? Lucas was my circle member, forever chained to me. I didn't want our shackles to be dipped in bitterness and anger.

I couldn't go through that, I thought, remembering my parents' pain and anger when they couldn't let things go. So I decided to try to forgive Lucas. But it was hard, as the pain was still fresh.

“I'll try, Lucas,” I said honestly, knowing he was with me on this journey, feeling my emotions alongside me.

Honesty was sometimes painful, and the look on Lucas' face as it crumpled broke my heart. But I couldn't repeat my mother's mistake, saying I would forgive and forget but then potentially using it as a weapon later. A buzz of reluctant acceptance came from Lucas, and he leaned forward, settling his forehead on my shoulder.

It was my time to support him.

“Okay,” he whispered. “I can work with that.”

“But please, Lucas,” I said, my words bringing his head up and his eyes meeting mine, “never again.”

Lucas nodded, determination on his face, “Never.”

At that point, an ease came between us. The hidden tension that we didn’t know we had, left us with an exhale. We hadn’t fully moved on, but we both recognized our pain. Neither of us wanted to prolong it, but instead, heal. I felt my shoulders relax as our bond mellowed, bringing a warm glow that simmered in our chests.

With our bond now settled, it easily shone a light towards the hollow place where Vincent resided in my soul, where the ice wall was still tightly wrapped around him. It reminded me of an animal trying to hide while being backed into a corner.

Taking a deep breath, it was time to deal with my other circle member, but first, I needed to coax Lucas onto my side.

“There is something else I need to say,” Lucas said cautiously as I dragged him back into my bedroom and made him sit on my bed. But whatever he needed to say had to wait.

“I really need to talk to you about these first,” I said, quickly hurrying to my desk to collect the pamphlets.

“Is there another thing I’ve done wrong?” Lucas asked warily, a nervous spark threatening to ignite.

“I wanted to talk about Vincent,” I whispered, scared my parents might overhear us.

Lucas grimaced before looking away from me. “I promised to stay out of this, Guppy. Vincent wants time.” He said it with detachment, but that couldn’t stop the curl of annoyance on his lip.

“I can give him time, but this is about our bond.”

Lucas perked up but spoke warily, “What about it?”

“Him blocking me- us worries me,” I said, biting my lip. “I fear it could be damaging our bond.”

Lucas inhaled sharply, his expression uncertain. “Nothing is damaging anything,” he said, trying to reassure me.

I held up the pamphlets on bond health, “But I’ve read that-”

Lucas interrupted me by taking my hands and pulling me to sit beside him on the bed. “This is just how Vincent is,” he said, gently stroking my palms.

“Does he do it to you too?” I asked, not sure if I wanted to know the answer.

“Yeah,” Lucas said, hesitating with a shine of sweat forming on his brow. “He had a bad experience with the bond.”

A cold feeling washed over me as I noticed the pale look on Lucas’ face and the rapid pounding of his heart. “What do you mean?”

“My leg, Guppy,” Lucas said, his voice tight. The bond between us wavered as he struggled to hold back his emotions. “He felt everything as it happened.”



A cold chill washed through me, taking the heat from my face. I couldn't imagine what that must have been like. The memory of Lucas's scarred leg and the thought of Vincent feeling it like it was happening to him, the amount of rushing emotions and scorching agony that Lucas must have felt as his leg burned.

All that and then Vincent feeling a copied version of what Lucas had felt. I had seen Lucas's scarred leg. That amount of damage wouldn't be coupled with a small amount of pain.

"Since then, he's been very closed off," Lucas continued. "He needs to control it." I could hear the grief in his voice and feel it through the bond.

His guilt tasted like cinders on my tongue. First, Lucas blamed himself for Vincent's fear and now suffered from what he believed was his mistake.

"It wasn't your fault he felt it."

Lucas looked at me from the corner of his eyes, the cool detachment almost chilling me to the core. His normally bright blue eyes were dull, dark, and sullen.

"It was," his voice spoke with the utmost certainty. I felt it rock through me, hitting me right in the stomach as Lucas spoke what he believed to be true. His bones knew it, his mind knew it, and his soul knew it. Nothing I would say would ever shake this kind of belief.

But I had to try.

“No, Lucas. I’ve been reading about how the bond works. In high emotional situations, we can’t control it,” I said, grabbing my laptop and showing him the tabs filled with information. “Circle members feel each other’s pain and death. It’s not your fault.”

Lucas read the information, his frown deepening. “We have to help him, Lucas,” I said urgently. “It’s unhealthy to block it. The bond could become irreparable if it stays like this. We can still keep it a secret, but he has to open up to us. It wasn’t your fault he felt what happened to you.”

“Guppy,” Lucas said with a sigh, looking uncertain.

“Please, Lucas,” I pleaded. “For Vincent’s sake and for the health of our bond.”

Placing the laptop down, Lucas faced me before sighing long and hard, rubbing his hands on his face before he looked at me with a nod.

A twinkle of delight and hope ran through me. I couldn’t stop the smile from forming on my face, to which Lucas gave a soft one in return.

“I hope you prepared a PowerPoint. He’s going to be a tough nut to crack.”



Going to school felt different. Everything was the same, yet everything felt new. I had a new sense of perception and

awareness. I was supposed to act like everything had stayed the same, but I needed to figure out how I used to behave.

*How did I talk, walk, breathe?* My chest constricted as I realized I didn't know.

"You're in your head again," Lucas said, teasing me with a soft chuckle, his arm wrapping around me and pulling me away from my locker. He pulled me close to his body, offering me comfort. "Stop worrying," he added.

*Yeah, like those magic words were going to stop me.* I rolled my eyes but leaned into him anyway.

"I think people know," I whispered, avoiding looking at the other students in the hallway. I felt like there was an invisible sign on me that said, *'She found another circle member!'*

Lucas pulled back and looked down at me. "No one does. You're worrying for nothing. Just be yourself."

I swallowed tightly. "How do I do that?"

Lucas chuckled, shaking his head. "You're doing fine," he said, kissing me on the tip of my nose.

I glared at his unhelpfulness till I felt someone's presence behind me, but before I could turn around, I felt the soft skin of two people's cheeks on both of mine, one on either side of me. Julia and Hannah's giggles erupted in both of my ears as Lucas mockingly glared at our friends.

"What are you guys doing?" I asked slowly.

“Well, for one, we missed you,” Julia said, pressing closer to my right. “And we want to get sick now, so we don’t get sick later.” Julia spoke as if it made perfect sense. I could see Julia’s bright lilac hair falling over my shoulder, tickling my lower neck.

“What?” I said, jerking my head back, but I could only move so far with both girls so close.

Julia sighed beside me while Hannah rubbed her cheek against mine. “We want to get sick before the transfers arrive in two weeks. We don’t want to miss our chance to find our circle members,” Hannah explained.

I couldn’t help but smile at them.

I knew that Julia and Hannah were circle seeker crazy. They longed for their soulmates, both dreaming of who they could be and how they would find them. They already dreamed and planned their future out. Julia dreamed of an all-woman circle, and Hannah believed that one of her circle members was already at this school, as told to her by a local psychic.

Or what Julia liked to call the town’s crazy.

They were the complete opposite of me, and I loved them for it. I often found myself wanting to join in on their search, to share in their carefree attitude. But at the same time, I couldn’t help feeling guilty for having found my circle before them when I had been avoiding the search altogether.

Fate was unfair a lot of the time. I just hoped they’d get what they wished for.

“Give us your cooties,” Hannah whispered into my left ear. The touch was unexpected, and I couldn’t help but tense up, feeling a growing anxiety in my shoulders. Although they were my friends and not members of my circle, they enjoyed being expressive through touch. Having been isolated for a while, I had developed a type of anxiety toward physical contact and was still working on overcoming it.

Lucas, who had noticed my unease, quickly reassured me through our bond before stepping forward. “Hell no! The only cootie spreading that will happen is between circle members,” he said, pulling out my water bottle and wetting his hands before flicking droplets at Julia and Hannah. “Back, witches!”

I giggled as they shrieked and backed away from the flying water droplets. “Nuh-uh. You’ve been playing nurse with her all week. So it’s time to share, Apollo,” Julia teased, sticking her tongue out and pulling me to her side.

Lucas only rolled his eyes, his eyebrow piercing catching the light, but said nothing as both girls asked how I was, now at a respectable distance. Being around them again was a welcome reprieve from the current stress in my life. But all too soon, they left for their lockers before class started, leaving Lucas and me alone again.

“Remember what I said. You will have a better chance at catching him off guard if you ignore him all day till school ends,” Lucas reminded me once we were alone again. Even Lucas couldn’t bring himself to say his name out loud.

I couldn't help but wonder how long they had been keeping this charade up. "I still don't understand why I have to ignore him till then," I said, biting my bottom lip as the sharp pain helped ground me. I didn't understand how doing what Vincent wanted would help our situation.

"Because," Lucas turned me slightly, tilting his body to the right so I could see over his shoulder. Vincent was down the hall, arms crossed with his usual frown, talking to another person, but his eyes were trained on us.

"He can't help himself. As much as he wants distance, he can't do it," Lucas explained with a coy smile. "He is expecting you to confront him. It's the logical thing to do. So, if you do what he asks instead of what he expects, he will hate every moment. You will throw him off guard."

"And... this will work?" I asked, tearing my gaze away from Vincent and giving Lucas my full attention. He was my teacher of Vincent lore, and I couldn't help but absorb his insights.

"Hell, yes. He expects these things from me, but you can get away with it for a moment. So, get your cute butt to class and do what normal people do. Ignore the turd on the side of the road," Lucas said with a smile, turning and sauntering off, making sure to smile and finger wave at the glaring Vincent as he passed.

I couldn't hear what they said, but I noticed their lips moving as they muttered to each other. Vincent stood to his

full height while Lucas's laughter echoed throughout the corridor.

It looked mocking, and the tension between them was palpable. But no one blinked an eye at their exchange. It was like any normal day with them. But I could feel Lucas now, his openness and feelings for Vincent. He was infuriated by him, but there was also a warm, cozy sense of infatuation. The emotion hugged around him like a soft blanket, and even I could feel the soft bristles of Lucas's affection for me.

How could some things feel different yet stay the same? I wondered, watching Lucas walk on without a care in the world with that swagger of his.

I quickly diverted my eyes as Vincent's returned back to me.

I can do this, I chanted in my head again and again. But Vincent wasn't making things easy, as I could feel the ice of his stare on the side of my face.

Lucas was right, he was waiting for me to approach, and I really didn't want to give Vincent that pleasure. Walking past him felt humorous when I noticed his shoulder tensing as I walked closer. His body coiled up like a snake, ready and waiting.

My joy and satisfaction peaked when he frowned with confusion as I sauntered off without a backward glance, heading towards the art side of the school. I just hoped the bright, bold colors and shapes that decorated the walls and lockers would be enough of a distraction for me to not go back to him just to have that moment again.

No one was around this time of the morning. Everyone was either at the front or in the center of the school, hanging around before the first bell went off.

I came to a stop. A small soft leather-bound book was laid out on the floor.

It sprawled out like it had fallen out of someone's bag. The thick cream paper inside looked expensive and wouldn't have been left there on purpose.

But what caught my gaze was the soft pencil drawings of people.

Naked people.

My mouth became dry as I stumbled forward, unable to pull my eyes away from the detailed piece on both pages, a drawing of two men kissing, both in a loving embrace.

One looked rugged with a heavy dark beard that looked like it was coming out of the page. He held the slightly smaller guy, his hands in his hair, locked in the motion of pulling the strands in his grip.

The other guy's face was slender, his eyes closed. I was wondering if it was from pain or pleasure, maybe both. But his face was tilted upright, in what could almost be described as worship on his features.

Their bodies were different. The dominant guy leaned over the slender one. Their chests close together, thighs rubbing together, and their... penises, hard and touching.



My face felt hot, but that didn't stop me from picking up the small book and soaking in the details.

The drawing was detailed, full of shading with soft pencil work. You would have thought it was a black-and-white photo at first glance. The detail of their bones, veins, and small blemishes on their skins was remarkable. They weren't perfectly beautiful, but together they were a masterpiece.

I couldn't help but flip through the pages quickly. Lips, eyes, and body parts all doing different sexual things. My eyes couldn't break from the flickering pages.

I stopped on another two-page piece of two large hands grabbing breasts. On one side, the hand was wide, its finger spaced out far enough to show the nipple peeking from in between. The imprints on the skin that the fingers made showed a tight grip. The other focused on the fingers, pinching the other nipple, mid-rolling it.

I forced myself to swallow while the memories of what Lucas did to me in his bedroom came rolling back to me.

*Lucas did this to me. I thought, did we look this beautiful?*

A hand slammed the small book out of mine. I jumped back with a yelp as it tumbled back onto the floor, landing face down.

Kai stood in front of me, his face red and sweating as he struggled to catch his breath.

"I'm sorry!" My voice came out in a squeak, an attempt to break the panicked tension. I couldn't believe he caught me

gawking at drawn naked people.

Kai avoided my gaze as he kneeled down, slowly picking up the book and binding it with a single leather string. He tucked it behind him, hiding it in his pants and covering it with his white, paint-stained top.

I suddenly realized that Kai had drawn those pictures. I had never seen him with this book before and never would have suspected that shy Kai would draw anything so...erotic. But, of course, it didn't help calm my already-raging cheeks.

I was at a standstill for admiring practically porn out in the open and Kai for drawing said porn.

By the look on Kai's face, it was clear that he knew what I had seen. His cheeks were bright red, and his forehead was covered in sweat. He was panting, and I feared that he might faint. But before I could say a word, Kai bolted. He ran out of the hall, and I couldn't blame him. I, too, wanted to run and hide, but I was afraid that Kai might never return, and that thought made my stomach twist.

Kai had always had issues with showing his work. I had observed him before, always guarding every piece he created. He would wrap his arm around the paper he worked on, and his body would cover most of his desk, hiding what he did from the world. He would react like a failed fuse when someone asked to see his work or caught a glimpse of it. He would turn bright red and stutter before going pale and shutting down any attempts at conversation.

Many times I had thought about talking to him, but I never wanted to set him off. But now I have. I groaned out loud, hating my curiosity for getting me into another uncomfortable situation.

*Why did I have to be so nosy?*



My mood didn't improve throughout the morning classes. The embarrassment of what had happened earlier with Kai ate away at me as I tried to keep an eye out for him and hopefully explain how sorry I was for looking at something so personal.

*But how could I look him in the eyes when he draws such detailed and intimate things?* I thought to myself, banging my head on one of the tables in the canteen.

"Why so glum, sugarplum?" Julia's voice brought my head up. Her soft dark brown eyes looked down at me with sympathetic concern. She was like the wind to me, wild and fierce but also gentle and soft. I loved both sides of her.

"Are you okay?" she asked slowly. "I mean, not just with your health, but also with Apollo and everything. The last time we saw you, you guys were fighting."

I didn't know what to say. The need to tell Julia everything was overwhelming, but I couldn't bring myself to do it.

"I'm good. We're good," I said with a forced smile, knowing she could tell I was lying. "It was just Apollo being...well, Apollo," I said lamely.

But how else could I explain that everything was in a ball of chaotic string? Thankfully, Julia couldn't question me further as Lucas and Hannah sat with us.

“What's the tea?” Hannah asked, sensing that something was off.

“We were talking about needing a girl's night,” Julia lied smoothly, changing the subject.

Hannah's eyes lit up. “Yes! Slumber party at Grace's house! Your parents are still going away soon, right?”

I nodded, completely forgetting that my parents were indeed leaving for a circle vacation and that they had planned this way before I found Lucas.

“I can get down with a nail painting session,” Lucas exclaimed, lifting his hand up and giving his fingers a little wiggle.

“Who says we'll be doing that kind of stuff? I was thinking of bringing my Ouija board,” Hannah said with an evil smirk as Julia chuckled.

Lucas's eyes widened with a true look of horror. His soul turned to a white terror inside me, forcing a choking sound to escape my throat. His panic eased when I placed a hand on his thigh, but my concern for him lingered as he looked ghostly pale.

Turning to me, he spoke seriously, “I think I'll give girl's night a miss.”

Julia and Hannah snickered, and even I couldn't help but smile at the odd fear quirk he was showing. I felt like Lucas could do anything, and I liked seeing every side of him.

It was only the four of us until the two cousins, Kristina and Dylan, appeared. My eyes instantly went to Dylan. I had nearly forgotten our encounter. His soft blue eyes met mine before widening at the sight of me. His throat bobbed as he muttered something to Kristina, looking flushed. It felt like years ago since that moment in the music room. Embarrassment filled me, making my stomach clench at how exposed our problems were and for Dylan to witness it all.

*How does one act now after finding out someone you wanted in your circle isn't?*

Dylan's eyes no longer looked my way, but his cheeks were still red, probably similar to mine.

*Was he, too, remembering when we touched each other?*

But my worry shouldn't have been Dylan. Not when Kristina blanched at the sight of all of us, coming to a complete halt. Her eyes flickered to each of us with a tremble before she took off. She had been distancing from me, but it seemed to have reached a new height of avoiding us all together now.

"Kristina?" Julia's confused tone called out to her, but she didn't look back.

"Er," Dylan looked a little sheepish, looking back at us from watching his cousin walk away, leaving him alone with our

confused gawks. Then, he pointed weakly in Kristina's direction, "I'm going to go check on her." He murmured before he, too, left.

"O-kay. Anyone else got the weird mojo vibes just now?" Julia asked after a beat of silence.

"If you mean Hannah, then yes. I thought I was the only one who noticed," Lucas said, sipping his drink with a smirk, obviously back to normal.

Julia clipped Lucas on his arm, "I'm being serious!"

"So was I!" He exclaimed, sending an evil smirk toward Hannah, who, in revenge, threw a tomato slice at him from her salad.

"I asked you guys earlier if you thought Kristina was acting strange," I said, feeling slightly better now that both girls noticed Kristina's strange behavior.

"I knew she was being quiet, but something was going on with her. Dylan, too by the looks of it," Julia added tightly. Her worry was now spilling out in the open for all of us to see.

Lucas went still, narrowing his eyes on both of the girls. "What do you know?"

"From what I've heard, you have problems with sharing," Hannah said, her voice honeyed along with her smile that grew slowly on her black-painted lips.

Hannah and Lucas had a rough game of banter. They were constantly at each other's throats, and it was hard to tell

whether they liked each other. Regardless of how far they took it, they remained friends.

I groaned, wishing the world would swallow me whole.

“It’s okay, Grace,” Julia reassured me, patting my arm. “Dylan only said something because he was worried when you weren’t in school the next day.”

Hannah nodded, “He was very worried.”

Lucas’ eyes turned into slits at Hannah’s enthusiasm. I could feel the liquid fire running through him. “He doesn’t need to worry. He isn’t our circle member, and implying his worry won’t help matters.”

Julia snorted, shaking her head. “You got it bad, Apollo.”

It was obvious that Lucas still held a grudge, and I was just thankful the bell rang before Lucas’ temper got the best of him.

In our last class of the day, I decided to confront Lucas about the matter.

“You should go and apologize to Dylan,” I whispered to Lucas in a low tone, hoping not to bother Ms. Green, our math teacher, as she continued her lecture.

Lucas turned to me, his pierced brow raised. “Why would I do that?”

“Because you overreacted to the fact that we checked,” I explained. Surely he knew his reaction was a problem?

Lucas' jaw jumped before he huffed, "I didn't overreact, Guppy. I just made my feelings on the matter clear."

It was then that I caught a glimpse of his true feelings. Lucas was good at covering them with a false bravado, but he sometimes let them slip, just like now. I had misjudged his jealousy. It wasn't Dylan he was jealous of. It was the fact that I willingly touched him when I would never have touched two of my own circle members freely.

I gave a small piece of myself that Lucas would never have - my first commitment to finding my circle member.

A small part of me pitied Lucas. By taking that first step was bound to cause a negative sentiment. But at the same time, I couldn't let this slide, only for it to build into a bitter whirlpool.

"We had a right to check," I said to Lucas, trying to keep my voice low so as not to attract the attention of our classmates.

But Lucas was not having it, "He already checked with me!" he hissed, causing a few people to turn and stare. Lucas gave them a tight smile before lowering his voice again, "He only did what he did because he has a crush on you."

My stomach did a little flip at Lucas's words. A crush? On me?

Lucas's eyes narrowed, obviously sensing my confusion through our connection. "Jesus, Guppy. You didn't see it? A blind man could see how much he likes you."



“I’ve never had someone like me in that way,” I said dryly. “How was I meant to compare from my other experiences?”

Lucas blinked before his eyes widened, “All this time, you’ve never known I’ve been flirting with you?”

“I wouldn’t say calling me a type of fish, flirting,” I snapped, crossing my arms over my chest.

Lucas slapped his hand to his forehead and gave a light chuckle. His blue eyes twinkled with amusement. “It all makes perfect sense now.”

I glared while his amusement tried to tickle its way into me, but it couldn’t pierce the negative emotions of guilt and shame I had on the inside when it came to my own feelings for Dylan.

“Is it meant to feel this bad when your first crush is not your soulmate?”

Lucas’s eyes widened to the point I was scared they might pop out from his skull, “Wait, wait, wait, your crush? You have a crush on Dylan?”

“What, you didn’t see it?” I asked sarcastically.

A strange noise came from the back of Lucas’s mouth as he openly stared at me. The noise brought Vincent to turn to us, but we both ignored his stare as I carried on, ignoring my heated cheeks.

“I mean, how do people get over their feelings if you’re not meant for each other?” I couldn’t be the first. Some people

never find anyone in their circle, and they must have had someone they might have liked.

Lucas looked at me for a moment, pausing with a heavy feeling.

“It’s just how life is. It’s why some people touch first before getting to know people. Saves the awkwardness.”

“Have you experienced this before?” I asked hesitantly. Some of me wished he had, hoping he could give me some advice, while the other side of me felt sick at the thought.

How messed up was I?

Lucas paused momentarily before shaking his head, “I’ve admired people, but never when I’ve touched someone have I ever felt disappointed.” He looked at me with a searching gaze, delving deeper into my being.

“You were disappointed that he wasn’t in our circle, weren’t you?” he asked slowly, a hint of sadness creeping into his tone.

I tried to push down my embarrassment, my hands feeling clammy as I rubbed them against my pants.

“Yeah, a little,” I admitted, feeling the bitter envy Lucas was experiencing. I watched him closely, noticing the muscle in his jaw tense as he processed my words. But I quickly added, “It doesn’t matter, though. He wasn’t in our circle, and nothing could come of it.”

Lucas frowned, obviously sensing the cloud of negativity within me.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, looking down at the table.

I frowned, feeling the weight of Lucas’s emotions like a sticky tar. It clung to him, making his shoulders slump.

“Why are you sorry?” I asked, not understanding this sudden change in his demeanor.

“Because I’m not like you, Grace,” Lucas whispered, his eyes shifting to the front of the class. “He told me how you were open to letting someone outside of our circle in. I could never do that. I’m too selfish to love anyone else outside of our circle. It would hurt me for our circle to love others also.”

“Lucas-”

“I know it’s not easy having me as your circle member,” Lucas said with a brittle smile. “I have a reputation, after all.” He paused, looking away from me. “But it all meant nothing to me. Sex was just that - sex. Before him, it was the only moment I felt a small kind of comfort.”

I wanted to understand where this sudden change in Lucas’s attitude was coming from, so I delved deeper into our connection. I was met with a sense of paranoia from Lucas, who believed I was disappointed in him being my circle member. This realization cut me deeply, as I knew that my initial reaction to finding Lucas hadn’t been the best. I understood now that his rising jealousy stemmed from his belief that I was dissatisfied with him despite never telling him so.

I had caused him to doubt himself. I felt like the worst circle member ever.

“You know,” Lucas interrupted my thoughts, his tone lightening as he sent me a flutter of amusement through our connection. “Technically, I was the first person here to have a crush on you. I did see you first.”

I could see that Lucas was trying to distract me with this statement, but I could also sense the underlying pride in it. I knew that Lucas still struggled with his true emotions and sometimes needed a reminder, but I also knew that he was quick to change the subject and avoid dealing with them.

“Lucas,” I sighed, reaching for his hand and holding it tightly. “I’m sorry.”

“There is nothing to be sorry for, Guppy. You’re allowed to have crushes. I want you to have all the life experiences shit. But I’m sorry because I’m a selfish prick who wants you all to myself.”

“No, I’m sorry I’m causing you to doubt yourself.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

There he went again, hiding his true feelings.

The bell’s ring marked an unfortunate end to our conversation. The shuffling of the class and their rising voices left me with a feeling of disappointment. I had wanted to reassure Lucas, but he seemed to push me away as he offered me a wide smile and pulled me up to stand beside him.

“Let’s see if your work paid off,” Lucas said, nodding his head toward Vincent, who was leaving the classroom hurriedly.

Vincent could wait. I needed to speak to Lucas first.  
“Lucas-”

But, again, Lucas waved his hand, dismissing his own feelings.

“Better hurry before he disappears,” Lucas muttered, dragging me through the crowd of students leaving the classroom. “He normally hangs around outside, watching like the creep he is.”

“Lucas.”

“Grace, I’m fine.” He said seriously, “You have enough to deal with. Go talk to Vincent, trust me.”

I couldn’t force him to talk if he didn’t want to, but I wasn’t going to let it go so easily.

“There he is!” Lucas exclaimed, nodding behind me, where I couldn’t help but turn to check.

There he was, standing and watching students as they huddled together and got into their cars. He was close to the edge of the building, out of the way of the frantic end-of-the-day rush.

“You can do this,” Lucas murmured, hugging me from behind and giving me a light push in Vincent’s direction.

“But-”

“Remember what we planned for you to say,” Lucas said, reminding me that I had, in fact, forgotten what I was supposed to say.

“Err,”

“Go get him!” He said, tapping my butt with the palm of his hand, which caused a strange yelp to escape my mouth in shock.

Looking back in alarm, I saw one of Lucas’s cheeky smiles as he gestured for me to continue walking. I grumbled under my breath, feeling like a child being made to play with other children.

I walked over to Vincent at a determined pace. His gray eyes were already on me as he watched. Before I could walk past him, he pulled himself off the wall and clasped my elbow. He walked us both around the corner, away from the other people in the parking lot.

“Vincent,” I blurted out. He was about to turn around another corner behind the school building. My heartbeat quickened as he slowly turned to face me.

His face was blank, unreadable, like our connection. I couldn’t stop the hurt I felt at this moment, staring at him. He was my circle member who held a part of my soul. I had spent the last few days not really coming to terms with that fact. I was mostly focused on the bond and learning about it. But as Vincent’s steel eyes locked on me with an aura of indifference, I wavered and stumbled.

I didn't know if he could feel me or if he blocked the bond both ways. But something flickered on his face before he settled into a look of annoyance.

"I was wondering how you were feeling?" He finally asked gruffly. Lucas's plan had worked, after all. Vincent looked at me like I was a nuisance, which felt like a stab in my gut.

His attire was crisp and well-groomed. His hair was back to the sleek style that suited the thick black rims of his glasses. Was this the real Vincent? My mind wondered, but I quickly realized I couldn't tell, leaving me feeling adrift.

Vincent was my circle member, and I knew nothing about him. I didn't know this stranger. My mouth went dry, making it hard to breathe, let alone talk. All the words I rehearsed with Lucas had now left me as I stood before him, him towering over me.

Vincent had always had this effect on me, making me either a stumbling idiot or an angry, snapping girl that got easily irritated by his blunt, cold words. So, I did the one thing I could do, which was nod.

It was Vincent's turn to look uncomfortable, but he didn't fidget or stutter like me. Instead, he only brushed his hand behind his neck, looking a little sheepish at my lack of response.

"Ho- How are you feeling?" I stuttered, mentally kicking myself for the tone I used. I sounded like I was about to attempt one of those salesman cheesy pitches at selling something.

“I have been sleeping like you, and I have been busy with work.”

I blinked. “You work?”

Vincent gave a slow, stiff nod but didn’t elaborate on what he did. It was just one of the many things that showed how much of a stranger my circle member was.

“Oh,” I muttered awkwardly as we both fell into an uncomfortable silence.

Crap.

This was horrible. How could talking to my own circle member be this difficult? Lucas was easy to speak to because he carried on the conversation, while Vincent allowed me to struggle.

I would give anything for the right words to come out of my mouth right now, I thought with a prayer, hoping something would answer it.

“I wanted to talk to you,” I mumbled, feeling slightly foolish at my previous optimism.

Vincent took a step forward, his head inclining down towards me. “I had Lucas give me the details on how you were doing,” Vincent said, easily cutting through our silence.

I groaned, feeling guilty. I hadn’t even asked Lucas how he had been doing. Instead, I had been focused on getting over the shock I experienced last week.



“He kept me up to date with your progress. I’m glad you’re feeling better.” Vincent whispered, lowering his head, making his glasses glint in the small sliver of light that peeked behind the gray clouds.

Vincent turned to make a hasty exit, but I acted impulsively and grabbed his arm, pulling him back towards me.

“Wait!” I shouted, not caring how loud my voice was. Vincent looked back, his eyes holding a questioning glint.

“About our bond,” I said hesitantly.

Vincent gave a painful-sounding sigh. “I thought we had an understanding, Grace,” he said, his soft, whispered voice able to freeze anything he wanted to. My words left me completely helpless, and I was defenseless against his gray, unblinking eyes.

“We do!” I broke through my stutter loudly.

Vincent’s eyes flickered around us, mainly looking at the students in the parking lot like he was worried people could overhear us.

“It’s just that I’ve been looking up, and you’re closing the bond,” I said, desperation creeping into my voice. I could see that I was losing him, and before he could turn me down again, I acted on impulse.

“Here!” I shouted, cringing at my loudness. But that didn’t stop me from diving my hand into my bag and pushing a bundle of flyers onto Vincent’s chest, nearly knocking him back with my sudden action.

Vincent's eyes widened in surprise as his hands came up to his chest, catching the large bundle of papers before they fluttered to the ground. "What..." His voice drifted off as he caught a glimpse of the many titles. I heard the sharp inhale before he pushed them back to me, "Put these away!" He snapped, looking around again.

"I understand you need time, Vincent. These leaflets are about bond health," I explained, trying to make him understand the importance of the information.

"Bond health?" He said, with distaste in his voice. Did he find the bond, or me, distasteful? Because he sure knew how to make me feel like I wasn't worth listening to.

"Yes. It's information about bond fractures. If we leave it closed off for a long period of time, it will never be fully connected," I spoke rapidly, needing him to understand the consequences of his withdrawal.

"You shouldn't believe anything you read, online or in those leaflets, Grace," Vincent spoke, but I had a feeling he was disappointed in me. "They're fear-mongering propaganda."

"But can't you feel our connection? It doesn't feel right," I said, trying to get him to understand how I felt.

Vincent gave a shrug, "I don't feel anything," he said, his harsh truth cutting me deep and nearly making me breathless.

"Are you really going to hold Lucas and me in this suppression?" I asked, my voice filled with demand as my

anger at his lack of care began to rise. “Will you really cast aside our health?”

Vincent sighed, his voice becoming gravelly. “Grace, I keep a great vigilance when it comes to all of us.”

“Oh, please! Don’t act like you care, Vincent. You didn’t before, and you don’t now. Not when you easily push us away,” I retorted, feeling the sting of his betrayal.

“You don’t think I care? I’ve done everything to keep-” Vincent’s cheek flexed as if he stopped himself from saying more. “I care. I do. I’ve apologized. I will admit that keeping this from you was a mistake. But I cannot change what has happened.”

I knew that no one could turn back time, no matter how much you wished for it to do so. “But I still hurt from it,” I said honestly, clutching my chest and feeling the ache of the betrayal.

“Then what do you want me to do, Grace?” Vincent asked, looking at me with a mixture of confusion and frustration.

I paused, unsure of what to say. What did I want him to do? I thought for a moment. But I wanted us to work. “I want you to open up to me and Lucas,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady.

Vincent shook his head. “No,” he said, backing up a little and looking ruffled at my suggestion. It was clear that the thought of opening the bond scared him. His stance, his

breathing, and even his narrowed eyes were all set on edge, all showing signs of an animal getting trapped in a corner.

My heart ached for him at that moment. To know how painful, lost, and confused he must have felt when he felt Lucas's pain. The horror of it would obviously leave a lasting effect, but Lucas's guilt made it impossible not to push Vincent to open the connection again.

I knew I had to help him.

"I understand why you're so closed off," I said slowly, raising my hands in surrender. "But if you just open up, it will all be fine."

Vincent glared at me with hostility.

"You don't know anything," he growled before storming off, leaving me feeling helpless.

I stood there, my mind reeling in an uncontrolled spiral. Everything felt out of control. Nothing I had set out to do today was working. Every choice led me further into a maze I couldn't escape. Vincent, Lucas, Dylan, Kristina, Kai, and my parents - all of their faces came rushing back at me. Lucas's hiding his emotions of doubt and regret, along with Vincent's cold distance.

With both of my circle members, I felt like I was on the sidelines, unable to support them.

"Guppy? Are you okay?" Lucas's voice came softly behind me, his hand brushing my arm in comfort. I didn't even know

he was close by until his warmth enveloped me, bringing me out of my own mind.

He could feel my haze. I was floating in space without an attachment, drifting into the void.

“Easy,” Lucas cooed, pulling me into his chest and making me breathe in his sunscreen and lemon scent. “Just breathe. You’re stressing out.”

“Ignoring him didn’t work,” I said pitifully, brushing my face with the hot tears running down my cheek against his soft, loose shirt.

“Trust me, it did. Vincent expected you to throw more of a hassle. The fact that you only came to him now is grinding on him,” Lucas reassured me.

“He won’t open our bond, Lucas,” I cried, shaking my head.

I felt my frustration, sadness, and anger all boil down to a wave of hopelessness.

My circle was a mess, on the verge of becoming irreparable, and I had no idea how to make everything better. This was what I was scared would happen back when I refused to look for my circle.

“I don’t know what to do,” I cried, clutching onto Lucas.

“Breathe,” Lucas ordered, rubbing my back, grounding me. “You’ve been through a lot in little time, Grace. It’s understandable for you to react like this. Now all I want you to do is listen to me talk, okay?”

I could only nod slightly, making my head pulse with pain, a pressured ache that lingered behind my eyes.

“First thing you need to know about Vincent is that he’s an asshole.”

“I’m sure that’s not the case,” I said, but Lucas snorted.

“No, Grace. I’ve been with him a few years to know who he is. He’s a stubborn ass, and nothing would ever change him.”

“So, there’s no hope then?”

“I didn’t say that,” Lucas sighed. “If anyone can fix him, it’s you, Guppy.”

The thought of fixing Vincent made me feel uneasy, but I wanted my circle to be happy, open, and honest.

“Besides, we are all a circle. Without each other, who else do we truly have?” Lucas said with a smile, but I could sense his sadness.

But Lucas kept his fake smile as he gave me a peck on the nose, “Now, I want you to go home. Run a nice hot bath and relax, okay?”

“But-”

“No, I’ll fix it,” Lucas said, pulling back slightly and giving me a soft, tender kiss before giving me a reassuring smile. “I can feel that your mind is all muddled. Let me deal with this one thing, okay? Let me do this one thing for you.”

I could only nod. I trusted Lucas to fix this because I wasn’t sure if I could. I felt a weight lift off my shoulders as I let him

take charge. I knew he would do everything he could to make things right for our circle.

I made my way home, feeling a sense of calm wash over me. I knew that things were far from perfect, but with Lucas by my side, I felt confident that we could work through any challenges that came our way.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### LUCAS

*I 'll fix it,* I groaned, banging my head against a brick wall as my words returned to haunt me. I was many things - a flirt, a party animal, *an idiot* - but a fucking miracle worker was not one of them. Because, unfortunately, that's what it would take to get Vincent out of his ass.

But what could I do when Grace was falling apart? I couldn't just leave her working herself up like that. We were a circle. It was our duty to care for and support each other. If one of us weren't taking their role seriously, I would happily step up and fill those shoes.

Who was I kidding, though? I was the worst person for this role.

Groaning again, I pulled myself up and walked towards Vincent's dorm room, hoping he was there and not hiding.

Surely things couldn't get worse.

"Apollo," Kristina's voice called out from behind me.

*Fuck!*



It's fine. Just keep walking like you didn't hear her.

"I know you heard me."

*Double fuck!*

Kristina was the last person I wanted to see or speak to right now. With only a few school residences around, she had obviously stayed to ambush me. She had no reason to still be here.

Avoidance was my go-to strategy, and I most definitely wanted to avoid her as much as possible. Her sad eyes and sharp tongue could cut a person up from the inside out, and I knew she wanted to give me the tongue-lashing of a lifetime.

As much as I wanted to continue to walk away from this growing clusterfuck, I knew I couldn't avoid it much longer.

I turned to face her while holding my arms out. "Kristina! Didn't see you at lunch." I dialed up the charm by giving her one of my winning smiles people tended to like.

"Cut the crap, Apollo." She snapped, unamused at my antics.

I dropped the act and smiled, sighing heavily. "Kristina, we spoke about this."

"No, Apollo, we haven't."

Technically we did, but she didn't like the outcome, but I wasn't going to say that with the way she glared at me.

I could see the blame and guilt coming from her. I had noticed the dreary look she'd been developing. The lumps

under her eyes from sleepless nights and her frizzled ginger hair that was starting to look like the beginning of a bird's nest. Kristina was hurting because she couldn't handle the secrets, and I knew what she wanted from me.

But I was uncertain if I could give it to her.

"We need to tell her," Kristina spoke firmly, arms crossed, showing her relentless resolve on the matter.

"I'm working on it!" I snapped, gritting my teeth together. I hated that everything was spiraling. I never expected this drama when I first found my circle members.

*You were the catalyst from the start...*

My mind taunted me, but I knew for a fact it was true. None of this would be happening if I just kept to myself. If I wasn't me.

"When?" Kristina snapped, her eyes blazing with accusation.

"Soon," *If I had it my way, preferably never,* I silently added.

Kristina scoffed, her crossed arms now unfolded to be on her hips, "You might be okay with this, Apollo, but I'm not."

I felt my anger rise at her blatant way of thinking. Did she really think I was okay with everything that had happened? I wanted to yell and rage at her, but my tongue felt tied. This was my own making.

*This was my fault. It always is!*

A soft, loving essence enveloped me for a moment, halting the rage I felt and suffocating the negative emotions I was experiencing. It brought a sense of peace and warmth, like the first light of daybreak. Grace was life, bringing new hope with every caress within me.

It was only fifteen minutes ago that she was spiraling with overwhelming emotions, but now she was with me, comforting me, worrying about me. I couldn't help but feel a heavy pit in my stomach. She didn't need me to add to her worries. I couldn't allow myself to add to her ever-growing doubts when she relied on me to fix things.

I quickly sent her my reassurance, along with a good dose of humor that I hoped would smother her new concern for me.

“Grace has been off, sick, with exhaustion. Do you really want us to add to that?” Of course, I was playing into the lie for my own advantage, but the panic that bubbled up in my throat was a hell of a trip. I couldn't stop seeing the look on Grace's face when she panted to catch a proper breath a few minutes ago. I couldn't allow anything else to cause her such pain.

I had promised.

Kristina's eyes flared. “You want to make me feel more guilty than I already do? How can you stand there and act like nothing has happened? How can you face Grace while she knows nothing about what happened between us?”

“Nothing happened between us, Kristina,” I replied. It was nothing. We didn't care for each other in that way. We have

been friends for all of our lives, practically growing up together in this town.

“Then I’m going to tell her,” Kristina snapped before barging past me. But I quickly grabbed her by the arm, pulling her away from the dorm building. You couldn’t trust the open windows that could hold prying ears.

“Listen to me. What we did was years ago. A one-time thing,” I said, trying to keep my voice low to avoid being overheard.

“I feel guilty, Apollo. How would Grace look at me knowing I slept with one of her circle members?” Kristina’s voice trembled. “But she needs to know. She deserves to know the truth.”

Kristina thought it was just one circle member, but if she knew that Vincent was one, too, I knew it would break her.

If Grace found out now... I couldn’t even bear to think about the pain it would cause her. She had to find out gently, if at all. I couldn’t bear the thought of losing her.

“Grace knows about my past mistakes, Kristina,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. My mind was in turmoil, and my heart was heavy with guilt.

“It’s one thing for a stranger, another for it to be her friend, Apollo!” Kristina’s eyes blazed. “We need to tell her together and explain that it was nothing.”

“You’re making it out to be a bigger thing than it was,” I said, desperation creeping into my voice.

“How dare you!” Kristina’s voice was filled with anger and hurt. “You have no idea how much pain you’re causing Grace by keeping this from her.”

“No, how dare you, Kristina. You have no idea the amount of pain you’re causing Grace by avoiding her,” I replied lowly.

Kristina’s recoil and hurt look were the driving point, the weakness I couldn’t help but zero in on. Her look of guilt, not only for what we did years ago but for how she was treating Grace now. But I struck before she could build the courage to attack me again.

“Perhaps you’re more selfish than people realize. You would bring Grace further down only to make yourself feel better,” I forced out a hollow laugh. “Here I thought you cared for others or is that all an act?”

I saw the slap coming and did nothing to stop it. The sharp sting on my left cheek was followed by the hot rush of blood heating up the contact area. Even my left eye threatened to water at the sharp power of the hit.

I deserved it.

“You know, you’re a lot of things, Apollo, but I hope you haven’t shown Grace this side of you.” Kristina’s voice wavered as anger flushed her skin. Her hazel eyes shone with the gleam of unshed tears. Her freckled throat moved up and down as she struggled to contain her emotions.

The urge to apologize was on the tip of my tongue. To beg for forgiveness and take back my words. To explain how I

couldn't control the fiery need to bring others down alongside me.

"Kristina-

"Save it, Apollo," she spat, making me fear that I had ruined yet another friendship. "I'm going to tell her."

The thought of losing Grace sent a cold spear of fear through me. I couldn't let that happen, not when I was already working on telling her myself. I grabbed Kristina's shoulders, my anger boiling over and my fear choking me.

"You can't, not yet," my voice trembled as I held onto her. "I'm honestly working on it."

"Apollo, let go of me," Kristina said tightly, her skin trembling under my grasp.

*If I let go, would she run to Grace?*

"Lucas," Vincent's voice came from behind me, a cold reminder of my fear and its grip on me.

It was enough for Kristina to yank her arm back. Her face paled as her eyes flickered back and forth between Vincent and me. I could see her mind trying to decide who was the lesser evil between us. I guess she decided we were both as bad as each other as she shook her head and gave a mumbled excuse before walking away with a hurried pace.

"Want to tell me what that was all about?" Vincent whispered as we both watched Kristina head toward her car.

“Not really,” I said honestly, walking towards the dorm building.

I couldn't allow Vincent to get involved. Not only would that bring more questions from Grace, but if Vincent knew Kristina would be a problem, it would open another can of worms. I took a little stroll toward the bike shed next to the dorm building. Normally, behind the small building would be a perfect hangout for smokers, but with the graying skies above, I knew no one would risk coming for a smoke. Vincent casually followed. I knew he would. His need to know if Grace's parents suspected anything compelled him to. As usual, Vincent had ignored me during the day when eyes were on us. He would only allow himself to ask the questions he desperately desired when we were truly alone.

“So?” Vincent asked as soon as I settled, leaning back against the heavily graffitied wall. His icy tone instantly struck a nerve inside me. The amount of anger I felt for him at this moment should be a matter of concern, but it was our normal at this point.

How can I love someone I hate? Because even with our fucked-up shit, I love him. If I didn't, who else would? Because no one knew Vincent as well as I did, not even himself. He would have known my feelings if he just opened the fuck up.

Sometimes we were in perfect harmony. But most of the time, we were like what I would describe as a frying pan spitting hot oil uncontrollably. Those tiny stings of hot oil

hitting your skin, hurting you, but you carry on cooking, knowing that bacon in the pan will taste so fucking good once is crispened.

*Why did I have to like meat so much?* I wondered with a mental sigh.

It wasn't him that was lying. It wasn't him that had to put on a brave face. It wasn't him that saw the look of betrayal in her eyes. The feel of it, god, so full of pain that it made me choke. Vincent was a guy who just expected you to deal with *it*, no matter what *it* could be.

Oh, your dog died? Get over it. Everything dies eventually.

Oh, you're tired because nightmares have kept you up all night? Just stop having them.

Oh, you're upset because I need you to lie? Technically, you're not lying if they're assuming and you don't correct them.

No matter what, Vincent always thought the solution was simple.

"So what?" I asked, leaning back against the building, knowing full well how he hated questions as answers to a question.

"Did they believe it?" He seethed, rubbing his eyes. The tiredness was just now getting to him, making his features look heavy as he fought to keep his eyes open.

You could only block the bond for so long. Grace thought I was a master at the bond, but Vincent controlled it like he was



the one who put it there in the first place. Smug dick.

With the way Vincent was looking, I couldn't fault Grace for worrying about our connection. I would never say it out loud, but the connection to Vincent felt hollow and brittle compared to hers.

It felt like it was ill...

"You should go take a nap," I said, avoiding the question.

"I don't have the luxury," Vincent snapped, making me grin. "I'm needed, and I can't avoid what is asked of me, unlike some. So, did they believe it?"

"I don't know," I said dryly, making no effort to sound reassuring.

"You don't know?" He said back with mock astonishment.

I shrugged, focusing on the forest behind the dormitory, "As I said, I don't know."

"How don't you know? Fuck me, Lucas, you need to know! Grace can't tell her parents." Vincent reprimanded me like I was some child. His voice was full of pompous bark that rubbed me the wrong way. Need, need, need. Everyone needed something, and I was getting close to hating the word.

"Are you even listening to me?" Vincent's voice sent a cold surge through my body.

"Yeah..." Lying was becoming second nature to me.

"No one can know yet. If..." Vincent trailed off, probably thinking of the repercussions if the news got out. Because if

someone did find out and told *them*, Grace would be pulled into another type of life that she would never be able to handle. So as much as I hated to agree with Vincent, it was best to leave Grace in the dark. Some things were better off not knowing.

That's when I felt it.

The panic crept up on me, gnawing at my heels and threatening to consume me whole. My fears and worries were chewing at me, making it hard to breathe through the chaos overtaking my mind.

I was on the brink of losing control. Dark images flickered in my mind, taunting me like silent jesters with sneering laughs. The air was thick with the smell of gasoline, making my mouth dry and parched.

A sense of dread was building at the back of my mind, causing a ringing in my ears. My vision was blurring, and my lungs felt tight, making it hard to catch a good breath.

I swore under my breath.

"Sit down," Vincent ordered, and I had no choice but to obey.

My heart pounded in my chest as my breathing grew shallow. My hands shook as I tried to fight the overwhelming sense of panic rising within me. I couldn't control it, and my thoughts were scattered, consumed by the fear swallowing me whole.

I was relieved that no one was around to witness this. Thankfully everyone had either gone home or were in their dorm rooms. Only a few would stay at the school for no reason.

“Breathe,” Vincent instructed, but I couldn’t. I tried to find a distraction, something to ground me, but there was nothing to look out on, only trees for miles.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to reach for Vincent emotionally. The instinctual need to feel him spiritually and to bathe in his essence. To have both him and Grace mingling sent me shuddering with a longing.

I wanted that. I needed that. The two of them together inside me, reassuring me that they would never leave.

But, of course, he was closed off from us. So, fucking controlled. It was the one thing he taught himself after the incident.

“We nearly lost her, Vinny.” My voice strained from it all. The thoughts and feelings of the last couple of days were washing over me. The relief I had felt after Grace learned about the secrets, lies, and Vincent. It was an ease to a grand ache I’d been feeling. It was a better feeling than when I finally took off some high heels I had worn for a night as a dare.

That shit was orgasmic, but this was on another level.

But I could still feel the stress of it all. There were some other things we hadn’t told Grace that had now replaced the

additional burdens, and it felt like it was still piling on.

*When was this ever going to stop?*

Vincent's expression was cold and unyielding as he stared ahead. "We didn't,"

I couldn't accept that. I slammed my hands on the wet ground, fueled by anger and frustration. I felt the familiar heat of my anger. I wanted to punch him, hurt him. Shake him up, so he had no choice but to listen to me.

"We could have!"

*And we still might.*

Vincent, of course, matched me with his gray eyes, flaring with a scowl, "We didn't. It went well. She's okay."

"She's not okay," I spat.

Who would be fine after believing their circle member cheated on them? Did I cheat? I wasn't sure, but I was angry, nevertheless.

I lied to her for him! Lied to her for her! Lied to her for them both!

Why did I suffer the consequences for trying to do something good? And what about Vincent? I lied for him. So, why wasn't he facing the same mistrust and punishment? Why was I the one being punished when all I tried to do was bring us together?

"Feel her. She is fine," he murmured, avoiding my gaze.

Shaking my head, I tilted it back and slammed it against the brick wall behind me. I allowed myself to sense her, to feel her spirit that made me yearn for things I used to want. She was the embodiment of my fantasy, something I could hold onto so I wouldn't sink deeper into the addiction that consumed me. It was my strongest compulsion.

But even now, Grace's emotions remained turbulent. Her worries were thick, dark, heavy clouds of anxiety, ready to burst. They clouded her mind, smothering the bright light of hope. Sensing her only fueled my desire to make things right. I had to be her beacon of hope.

"What are we going to do?" I asked, breaking the silence.

Vincent looked at me with a cold, hard expression. "You will do nothing."

"Nothing?" I exclaimed, "I lied to her, Vinny. I lied. You lied. We both haven't told her everything!"

"Our plan is still the same. Nothing has changed."

"Everything has changed!" I shouted, standing to face him. Despite my love for him, the anger and frustration threatened to consume me.

"Nothing has changed," he insisted, his voice firm and unyielding.

*If Grace found out...*

"You should have told her sooner. If Samson finds out-"

“He won’t.” Vincent interrupted, but I could sense the hint of uncertainty in his words.

It was then that I knew while Vincent may be skilled at hiding things, he couldn’t keep it all hidden. He was dependent on our bond, despite his efforts to resist it. His barrier was not as strong as he thought, and I felt a sliver of insecurity twist our connection like an icicle.

“Will it still be a month?” I asked, hoping he would bring the date forward. But I knew I didn’t need the bond between us or to look at his emotionless face. I knew he wouldn’t do what he said, and that’s what hurt the most.

“We are not changing the plan. I’ve planned it all out, Lucas.”

*Liar.*

That was the only lie Vincent ever told. Honestly, I didn’t think he even knew it was a lie. I may be addicted to drowning in my sorrows, but Vincent held another addiction altogether. A far more dangerous game that I knew he wouldn’t stop playing. Perhaps he couldn’t, or maybe he was so far in denial that he didn’t see how trapped he was.

“I know you’re scared.”

Vincent frowned, his face twisted into disgust as if I offended one of his mothers or something.

“I am not scared.” He spat out in anger. But he couldn’t fool me.

“Then why are you holding everything back?”

“You know why!”

“Then leave!” I hissed, like a steam train, releasing the hot vapors from the burning inferno inside me. The frustration of it all was piling up.

Vincent chuckled darkly, “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t I?” I asked flatly.

Vincent’s face fell, his throat bobbing as his eyes flickered away from mine. It was a cheap shot, but I was grasping at straws here.

“I didn’t mean it like that.” Vincent’s eyes then went down to my scarred leg. I watched him swallow again before looking away, causing a revolting disgust to tumble in my stomach.

Without relying on our bond, I knew Vincent well enough that he couldn’t stomach looking at my scars. And in these moments, I wished I had lost my leg. Then at least, he wouldn’t have anything to look at.

“You need to open the bond.” I said in a whispered plea.

Vincent snapped his head towards me, but he said nothing. It was the opening I needed to reach him.

“Grace isn’t fine, Vincent. She needs something to cling onto.”

“She has you.” He muttered bitterly. To which I couldn’t help but laugh without an ounce of humor.

“She doesn’t want me,” I said with the same bitterness.

I was Grace's disappointment. She ran from me, longing for Vincent and someone outside of our circle. But that wouldn't stop me from still wanting her. I would try to be anything she needed as long as I had a piece of her. I had been living with a piece of Vincent, so I could do the same for Grace. I didn't care...

*Liar.*

What a fucking mess this all was.

*Whose fault is that...*

Vincent's face twisted with stress as he pinched the bridge of his nose. "I don't think I can," he murmured.

"All she wants is for you to open the bond," I urged.

"I can't do that. Not yet," Vincent replied, his voice trembling with uncertainty. He looked a little green at the thought.

"Then take her out. Give her something, at least," I pleaded, trying to push him. If they sat down and talked, I was sure it would crack Vincent's ice.

"I can't just take her into town," Vincent protested, his resolve weakening.

"Then take her out of town. Someplace where no one knows you," I suggested, growing increasingly frustrated with his hesitation.

"I don't know," Vincent wavered.



“Stop being an ass!” I hissed, stepping closer to him. “You’re punishing her without realizing it. She is innocent in all of this.”

“Exactly! Innocent!” Vincent shouted back, his teeth bared in anger. “You think I want this?”

“I think you don’t know what you want,” I retorted, my own patience wearing thin. “But I know you can’t have both worlds, Vinny. Before, it was only us, and we could have dealt with everything. But now, Grace is here, and she’s going to be involved sooner or later. You have to choose, or we will lose her.”

Vincent’s eyes slowly looked around as he closed the distance between us, his hand cupping the back of my head, gripping my blonde strands of hair, while the other cupped my face. The intensity of his gaze was overwhelming as he pressed his body against mine.

“I won’t let that happen,” he whispered, his fingers glided over my cheek, his breath hot against my face. His scent washed over me, a balance of clean soap and spice, an odd scent that was just... Vincent.

My hands roamed over his body, memorizing his touch, savoring his rare comfort. Us holding each other wasn’t a normal occurrence.

We either fucked or fought.

*When was the last time we touched that wasn’t sexual?*

“I won’t let that happen,” he repeated, leaning forward to rest his forehead against mine.

“You can’t control everything, Vinny,” I whispered, my words heavy with fear and uncertainty.

His hand at the back of my head tightened, holding me still. I felt my cock tighten in my pants as I witnessed the familiar storm brewing in the depths of his raging gray eyes. I knew hiding under those clouds was a fiery passion of emotions getting ready to rumble.

“Watch me,” His voice growled before his lips crashed onto mine.

His mouth was cold from the evening air, but kissing Vincent was like a raging sea. Vincent was great at not showing his true feelings, but his passion showed in another light as his lips hit mine.

I didn’t stop my moaning as he slammed me against the wall. The sharp pain across my back took the breath out of my lungs, but Vincent didn’t care, and neither did I. We were a blazing inferno together, biting, scratching, and doing anything in our power to balance between our pain and pleasure.

Kissing him was always a battle I loved to fight. It was a battle of wills and power. I craved his dominance and the need to show him I wasn’t a pushover.

I grunted when his fist pulled my head to the side, making my cock weep with need. Vincent didn’t help my arousal when

his teeth dragged down my throat before biting me hard, making me yell out.

It was nearly enough to have him just like this. But I knew every time we parted, the ache of his distance would return tenfold. At the reminder of the pain, I instinctively reached out to him, but Vincent's and mine connection was still under lock and key.

It just made his tongue taste bittersweet.

I thought Grace was his answer. That she would push him to make a change. If she couldn't fix us, who would? But nothing will change, I thought. We were all doomed from the start.

I could only pull away with a shake of my head,

Vincent panted. You would think he had just been for a run, not worked himself up with lust. But his cock dug into my leg, softly rubbing against me.

"We will be fine, Lucas," he whispered, his fingers tracing my cheek in a way that could almost be considered loving. But his words were hollow, and they fell on deaf ears. The weight of pressure in my chest wouldn't ease, but I knew how to numb the pain - a few drinks, a joint, or something stronger.

***Just one more won't hurt for old-time's sake.***

My breath hitched from the lure of those dark, velvet thoughts. Nearly too strong to ignore. I tried to push the thoughts away as I looked up at Vincent, frowning.

"What's wrong?" He asked, leaning back to get a better look at me.

I pulled away from him, looking into his eyes. I wanted to tell him that the cravings were back, that I was struggling.

*Tell him!* My mind screamed.

***Do you want him to look at you in disappointment again?  
You're already a disappointment to Grace...***

I forced a smile. "I'm just worried about Grace."

"You're really worried about her," Vincent observed.

"You didn't see how you left her. You can't feel her stress or anxiety. It's been growing since she found all that 'Bond Health' material," I added, unable to resist a bitter dig at his lack of empathy.

"Where did she get that stuff?" Vincent asked, his usual glare directed at me.

I shrugged, "No idea.."

Vincent shook his head, "You shouldn't let her read that stuff. If it scares her, take it away."

He spoke as if he knew Grace inside and out. Perhaps he did with his freak stalking,

"Yes, like I have control over her, or you for that matter. Wouldn't that be easier if I had full control of both of you?"

"You're such a brat," Vincent said, but his voice had a hint of amusement.

"And you're an ass. I guess we're all disappointed in each other," I retorted, my frustration getting the better of me.

Vincent sighed, "Unfortunately."

His words cut deep, and I couldn't help but feel the sting of rejection. But I forced myself to grin and not react. I knew he was joking, right?

"Fine, your job is to try and not let her get too stressed out. Find out where she's getting these ideas from," Vincent said, stepping back. "And I will take her out."

A spark of hope ignited in my chest. "Really?"

Vincent nodded, and I couldn't help but throw my arms around him, causing a grunt to escape his lips.

"I knew you had a heart in there somewhere!"

"Get off," Vincent grumbled, pulling away from me to straighten his clothes.

"Don't worry, your asshole meter is still high," I teased, feeling elated that I had been able to help Grace in some way.

I was being a true circle member!



As I strolled up the familiar street of my neighborhood, the cool night air enveloping me, I couldn't shake off the feeling of longing as I watched Vincent's car fade into the distance. I had just received a ride home from him, a rarity and luxury. I placed a newly rolled blunt between my lips, relishing in the small moment of freedom before entering the pits of hell that was my home.

But I couldn't dwell on the negative, not when Vincent was finally going to make his move. I felt like a giddy child, full of

excitement and wanting to tell Grace, but I wanted Vincent to be the one to ask her. I wasn't one of his errand boys, after all.

As I walked through my broken gate, a breathless voice called out to me from behind.

“Hello!”

I turned to find a man approaching me, his smile wide and friendly. He looked like a wannabe Vincent, lacking the asshole persona. But I could see the hint of hesitation in his eyes as he took in my appearance, piercings, clothing style, and the blunt in my hand.

“Erm... Are you Lucas Apollo Moore? Grace Millington's circle member?” He asked, glancing down at a piece of paper in his hand as if he needed to be sure he had the right person.

I couldn't help but smirk at the thought of someone like him trying to grasp that fate had paired a kind, innocent girl like Grace with someone like Vincent and me.

I said nothing, choosing to observe the man in front of me. That was his prerogative if he wanted to judge me based on my appearance.

I took this stranger in by smoking my blunt and watching him as he fidgeted.

He looked my age with a round face, red nose, and rosy, plump cheeks from the cold air around us. He reminded me of my old hamster, same hair color too. Though, this guy had a combed-over style that matched his clothes. He continued to

squirm under my observation. He fiddled with the end of his tie like it gave him comfort.

I blinked slowly as my smile grew before a chuckle came out of me from my train of thought.

This guy was exactly like Grace but dressed like Vincent.

Blowing out the smoke with a sigh, I cut him slack. He didn't recoil in disgust at me like some people in this town would.

"Who's asking?" See, I could play nice.

"Apologies! My name is Andrew. I'm the school's new missionary," he said, introducing himself.

*Ah, shit*, I had heard rumors about this guy. Mrs. Mason was really trying to tighten her grip on how the school was run.

"Sorry, wrong guy," I muttered quickly and turned to head to my front door for a quick escape. There was no way I was getting involved with the SCC.

"Well, Graham Millington said he lives here." Andrew's voice sounded closer than before.

Andrew followed me to my cluttered front lawn like he was about to follow me inside. Never in my life was he coming in and seeing the mess that was my family.

I have to give him some credit, though. He only eyed the trash scattered around us without a questioning or sympathetic look. Instead, he looked back down at his papers with a confused frown.

“Did I write down the wrong address?” He muttered to himself, making the papers in his hands shuffle chaotically.

I couldn't help but let out a groan as the reality of Andrew's words hit me. Fucking Graham, I couldn't believe Graham would do this to me. I was so going to get him back for this.

I looked back at Andrew, who now had a hopeless expression. He looked like a puppy who had accidentally kicked another puppy and didn't know how to apologize. Despite my original hesitancy towards him, I found myself feeling a strange pull toward this awkward stranger.

It seemed I was a sucker for hot awkward people. Sue me.

“Ooh, *that* Lucas Apollo Moore? Yeah, that's me,”

Andrew's face lit up like a Christmas tree, and he stepped closer to me, almost stumbling in his excitement.

“Ah, blessings to you and your circle member!” he exclaimed, reminding me of an excitable puppy.

*Hmmm, a crossbreed of a hamster and a puppy...* I thought as I watched him awkwardly as he rummaged through his happy sack of goods that flapped against his side.

I watched him for a moment, questioning my sanity. Why hadn't I just gone inside and shut the door in his face? But Andrew pulled out a few flyers before I could and handed them to me. My eyes widened as I read the title of one of them: ***‘Preparing for the Perfect Circle Family?’***

“So, you're the one who got Grace all worried,” I muttered, looking down at the leaflets. I knew I would have to have a



talk with Grace now.

“I’m sorry?” he asked, looking at me with confusion in his wide eyes.

“You’re forgiven,” I replied, returning the blunt to my lips and taking a drag as I read through the flyers. A shimmer of temptation struck me as I read them, but I couldn’t go down this rabbit hole no matter how curious I was.

It just wasn’t worth it.

I couldn’t follow the standard rules, let alone the many restrictive ones imposed by the SCC. Gossip spread quickly in this town, and I knew that the Sacred Circles Community here claimed to be able to help with many issues. But if they couldn’t help you, you got the boot. A good-old, sweep-the-bad-under-the-carpet kind of boot.

“Listen, Grace is impressionable right now, and she doesn’t need this added pressure,” I said, blowing out a thick cloud of smoke.

Andrew’s eyebrows furrowed, unsure if it was from the smoke or my words. But he stood strong, tightly holding a bundle of papers in his grip.

“Then she needs the SCC more than ever,” he countered.

*Yeah, not happening.*

I shook my head in disagreement. Some may see the SCC as a family, but in reality, only those who fit their mold were welcomed. The rest were left on the sidelines or shunned by the community. Grace would be easy prey if they ever got

their claws into her. She could be easily manipulated to their views.

“As her circle member, it is my duty to think of what is best for Grace, correct?” I said. Even though I knew Grace had her own mind and ideas, I knew this guy would eat this up. Also, I couldn’t help the pride I felt at calling myself a member of her circle.

“Oh, yes. Of course,” Andrew said, shrinking a little as he hunched his shoulders and cast his eyes down.

It was a pose so similar to Grace’s it threw me off for a moment.

“Right, yes. I apologize. I didn’t mean to overstep,” Andrew muttered, his previous excitement now non-existent. His expression dropped like a wet rag onto the floor.

*Shit, wasn’t it bad luck to upset happy people or something?*

I clapped Andrew on the shoulder, giving him a reassuring squeeze. “Hey, it’s no problem,” I said, trying to ease the tension.

Andrew’s head perked up before I could make my escape. “But if you ever need help, I’m always available,” he offered, sounding genuinely concerned.

I mentally cringed at how off my game I was. “Right, sure,” I responded, putting on my best Apollo smile, which always seemed to charm people. “You’ll be the first one I call,” I lied, hoping he couldn’t see through my facade.

Andrew's face flushed with excitement as he took a step back, as if in shock that I would accept his offer. "Really?" he asked, his voice filled with hope.

Feeling guilty for leading him on, I quickly retreated to my front door. "Sure," I said, calling back to him as I shut the door behind me. "I'll call you."

As I leaned against the door, I couldn't help but feel like a fraud. I knew I was maybe going to hell before, but it was all but certain after that conversation.

"Apollo?" My dad's voice called from further within the house.

I wasn't surprised when a loud crash echoed from the kitchen, probably another box full of clutter knocked over. A panicked curse followed, and as much as I wanted to ignore the chaos in this house, I reluctantly made my way toward the kitchen.

As I entered the littered room, I saw that a box had indeed fallen from the already overloaded kitchen table. But what did surprise me was that it was a brand new one, filled with random items that I knew my dad couldn't resist buying.

"You bought more stuff?" I asked, my voice tight as I nodded toward the fallen box.

My dad's face turned pink with guilt as he walked towards the box, positioning himself in front of it like a guard. He probably thought I would take it away, but I knew it was a futile effort. He always brought more stuff back.

“It’s...er...just a few things,” he mumbled, his eyes fixed on the box’s contents.

I could see the internal struggle on his face, the need to show off his new treasures, and the need to hide them. But his decision was made as he reached in and pulled out a pile of old, crumpled magazines wrapped in twine.

“I found these at the shop. Old vintage literature,” he said rapidly, but I couldn’t bring myself to look at the papers he held out to me. They were just another pile of many already scattered throughout the house.

What had once started as a small collection in my dad’s bedroom had grown into a chaotic mess. His room was filled to the brim, and now the clutter had spread everywhere, including the kitchen, where we could not use the dining table. Piles of random papers littered the floor, some even melding with the carpet from people trampling over them.

“I found this recipe in the magazine. It was one of your mom’s favorites,” my dad said, his hand caressing the glossy pages.

I couldn’t understand why my father needed to hoard all this clutter in our home. The kitchen was cluttered to the point where we could hardly use the stove, yet he couldn’t let go of any of it. I doubted he would even use that recipe he had found, but his mind was set on the idea that maybe he would one day.

“Why are you here?” Laura sneered, pushing past me as she stood in the center of the room like a queen surveying her

subjects. As usual, she didn't spare a glance at the piles of clutter around her, her scowl solely directed at me.

"This is my home, isn't it?" I asked, looking around the cluttered space.

"A home is where you're wanted," Laura spat. "And you're not wanted here."

Dad sighed, rubbing a hand over his face in exhaustion. "Laura," he murmured.

"What?" she exclaimed, her voice rising in accusation. "It's the truth. Apollo is a fucking lowlife, and we're all better off without him."

As usual, Dad said nothing in my defense. Instead, he offered me a sad, apologetic glance before looking down, his shoulders hunched. He absently stroked the pile of magazines as if they were a source of comfort for him. And in a way, they were. All this clutter was his form of self-support, something to hold on to until he found the next thing to fixate on. But if anyone attempted to get rid of it, it would suddenly become the thing he couldn't live without. The cycle would continue.

I couldn't help the anger and resentment that bubbled up inside me at the lack of backbone my dad had. And the smug smirk on Laura's face was the cherry on top of this shit sundae. It was just fucking perfect.

"I guess that's why Beau didn't take you with him either," I snapped, knowing it was a sensitive topic.

Beau, our so-called father, had left us all. He couldn't stand to look at my biological dad or me anymore. He took our older brother, his biological son, Liam, with him and only kept in touch with Laura and our other dad, Simon. Laura always asked to meet up with them and begged to live with them now that she was older.

"You don't know anything!" she shouted, but the damage was done. I turned to leave, feeling unwanted and unwelcome in my own home.

"I might not know everything, but what I do know is that you're still here." As I spoke, I braced for the strike I knew was coming. Even my body was ready for it, but before her hand could connect, my dad's soft voice interrupted.

"Laura," my dad said, his voice barely above a whisper but loud enough for all of us to hear.

Laura lowered her hand, her eyes flashing with fury as she sent me a death glare before she let out a screech of anger and stormed out of the kitchen, her steps heavy with rage.

"Are you okay?" my dad asked, still clutching the magazines tightly in his hands, his voice filled with concern.

"Laura is a bitch," I stated, my words coming out bitter and harsh as I ignored his question. The sound of Laura's door slamming echoed throughout our small house, the force of it shaking the walls and adding to the tension in the air.

My dad winced at my words, and I watched the disappointment wash over his face. It hurt to see, but it was

nothing compared to the pain I felt in my chest, a mix of anger, frustration, and disappointment.

“I thought...,” my dad began, looking away as he struggled to speak, his voice filled with sadness and longing. “I thought things would be different now that you found Grace.”

*Yeah, so did I*, I thought as my hand ached from how tightly I gripped it.

I wanted nothing more than to punch something to smother my anger and pain. My chest ached for release. My mind kept returning to the weed bag I knew was tucked away in my back pocket, a tempting escape from the overwhelming emotions.

“I thought we could try being a family again. Or at least be civil,” my dad continued, his voice filled with hope and longing, yet his eyes conveyed a deep sense of defeat and resignation.

I held in the urge to laugh.

It was just another one of his delusions.

The truth was that both of my dads were broken, and their circle had crumbled once one of their foundations was gone. They would never be a family again. It was too bad I had only realized that a few years ago.

It would have been nice for my younger self to stop clinging to that hope. So many tears and so much grief could have been saved.

But my fathers would rather turn a blind eye to the harsh reality of our situation than face it head-on. Their denial only

fueled my determination to never become like them. I would make sure to never let anyone in my life leave and turn my world into a crumbling mess.

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled.

But my dad either ignored me or was lost in his own thoughts, his eyes glazed over as he held tightly onto the magazine, clinging to his fantasy of a perfect family.

“We should sit down and have this for dinner,” he whispered, his voice filled with longing and hope.

I was sure that, in his mind, he had the perfect family. He did before I came into the picture, at the cost of my mother’s life. But I knew that fantasy was just that, a fantasy. We would never have that family dinner. At least I knew what I was, instead of being wrapped up in a make-believe fantasy, ignoring the real world that was growing more toxic the longer they ignored it.

Leaving him to it, I left the kitchen, ready for the day to end. But first, I had to get past the viper’s pit. As though she could sense me, Laura snapped her bedroom door open and stormed towards me. I couldn’t stop myself from tensing as she passed, ready for the physical and verbal strike. But I was put at ease as Laura shoulder-checked me when she passed and hissed in my ear.

“I wish you fucking died.” Her mouth full of venom made her entire face sour, but I didn’t have the energy to say anything as she returned to the kitchen.



I reached my bedroom door before I heard her and my dad talking.

“When are you going to kick him out?” Laura’s voice was loud enough for me to hear, filled with malice and contempt. But I couldn’t bear to face it today, so I slammed my door shut, seeking refuge in the privacy of my own room.

# CHAPTER SIX

## GRACE

“Can you please say that again?” I asked in a breathless whisper, pressing the phone tightly against my ear. I slammed my notebook closed and threw it aside, along with the rest of my now-forgotten homework. My heart raced with excitement and nervousness.

It was a Saturday morning, and I never expected Vincent would be on the other end of the phone when I accepted an unknown number. I tried to steady my pounding heart, which was still beating wildly since Vincent’s voice came from the other end of the line.

The line was quiet, and for a moment, I thought he had hung up on me. But then his long exhale came from the other side.

“Lucas and I talked, and he believes we should get to know each other and... I agree,” Even his voice came off tight as if the words were physically painful for him to say.

*Did I honestly hear that right?*

“You...agreed?” I asked slowly, my mind struggling to process this new information. The thought of Vincent agreeing to anything Lucas said was so foreign to me.

I heard a grunt before he spoke again, but this time his tone was snarky, “Yes. It is quite a reasonable request to know your circle members.”

“But I thought...” I trailed off, unsure if I should question him. I felt that any pushback on my part could cause him to pull away. But I couldn’t help but wonder, “I thought you needed the distance?”

“I don’t *need* it,” Vincent said with a snap, his tone sharp and dismissive. The line fell into a heavy silence, and I could feel the tension building. But then he let out another drawn-out sigh, and his tone softened, “Look, I just want to take you out for lunch. Give you a better explanation and just talk.”

“You are giving me a little bit of whiplash,” I said honestly before biting my lip to stop myself from going on at him.

“I know. I’m sorry. I want to keep us on the down-low, but I do want to spend time with you. So let me take you out to lunch.”

“Okay, when?” I asked, my heart beating faster at the thought of spending time with him.

“I’m driving to you now,” He simply mentioned before hanging up.

“What?” I exclaimed, looking down at my phone in alarm. My heart raced as the reality of Vincent coming to pick me up

hit me. My body jolted into action, and I rushed to change out of my pajamas, my relaxed morning study session now a frenzy of preparation.

As I finished getting ready, my phone rang again. I had expected it to be Vincent, but the contact name was different. A smile spread across my lips as I answered.

“I don’t know what you said to him, but thank you, Lucas,” I said, my voice filled with gratitude.

Lucas chuckled warmly, “I told you I would fix it.”

“I never doubted you,” I spoke truthfully. Lucas had a way with words, a charm that could sway anyone’s mind. But a nagging thought lingered in the back of my mind, wondering if he had bullied Vincent into agreeing.

“Ahhh, Guppy, you know the right words to say,” He murmured softly. I felt a warm sensation in my chest as if a piece of Lucas’s pride had taken root within me.

But it was quickly replaced by a sudden alarm within me. I was going on a date with Vincent. I’d only been on one date before: with Lucas by the lake.

“What do I do?” I asked suddenly, my nerves starting to take over.

“Just be yourself,” Lucas spoke like it was the obvious thing to do.

*Right... Myself...*

Lucas must have sensed my hesitation, “Don’t overthink it, Guppy,” he said firmly.

“But what if I mess this up?”

“You won’t,” Lucas said sternly. His voice was strong and confident like it stood on a solid foundation of truth. He believed in me. “Vincent will love you.”

The word ‘*love*’ hit me like a ton of bricks. It was like my body ceased to exist at that moment.

Vincent’s liking for me was engraved deeply in his soul, like mine was for him. But love? That was a whole different ball game, filled with uncertainty and questions. Did Vincent want that kind of relationship with me? He did kiss me, but maybe it was just a moment of insanity with all the high emotions from that night.

I didn’t know what to say to Lucas, so I forced a cough, hoping to clear my tight throat before uttering, “I...I have to go now.”

Even to my own ears, I sounded extremely tense, but I tried to think nothing of it as I hung up on Lucas. He quickly sent me his warm and cozy reassurance, melting my frozen insides.

“You look nice today,” Da commented as we passed each other on the stairs. His voice brought me back to the present from thinking about, questioning, and imagining how our lunch would go.

I stared at Da, who gave me an odd, confused look before asking, “Going someplace nice?”

His comment made me look down at my outfit. It was one of my normal outfits, but... did it look like I was trying too hard? It was too late to change now. Vincent could arrive any second.

“I’m going out for lunch,” I spoke back loudly, continuing my way down the staircase, hoping my other parents would hear this and think nothing of it as I made my way to the front door.

“You’re going out with Lucas today?” My mother’s voice startled me as she appeared out of nowhere. I saw a pleased look on her face, and I couldn’t help but feel guilty for lying.

I gave a hesitant nod and hoped my face wouldn’t reveal the lie burning inside me.

I was becoming a compulsive liar. When would this end?

Either she ignored my guilt-stricken face, or I was better at hiding it than I thought, as she carried on with a beaming smile, “I’m so happy you both have made up.”

“We are still working on it,” I said honestly, my attempt at a smile feeling more like a forced grimace.

Mother hummed in agreement, “I’m sure you both are. But give yourselves some credit. It’s only been a couple of weeks since you found one another. And I’m sure this won’t be the last disagreement you both will have.”

Mother leaned in towards me, her voice lowering as she added, “Just wait till you find another member. Then what you

both have worked on will be thrown off balance.” She laughed as if she couldn’t wait to witness that.

*Did she know?*

The thought that mother might know about Vincent made my heart race and my palms sweat.

“But you don’t need to worry just yet,” she said, beaming before giving me a soft kiss on my forehead.

I tried not to squirm from the guilt that wiggled around my chest. I really wanted to tell her to ask for advice, for some guidance. These last few days, I had felt lost and uncertain about what to make of our situation. But as I opened my mouth, finally willing to spill everything, my mother spoke.

“Is that Lucas?” Mother said with a frown, squinting as she looked behind me out of the front window.

My stomach dropped as I saw Lucas’s car parked outside. But from the dark hair clearly visible through the windows, it wasn’t Lucas.

“Erm,” I stuttered, trying to think of a reasonable answer, but my mind was blank as I nervously bit my bottom lip.

Mother shot me a suspicious look as I grabbed my bag and rushed out the door, calling out a hasty goodbye. My heart was pounding as I made my way to the car, the weight of my guilt and the fear of being caught pressing down on me. I couldn’t shake off the feeling that mother knew more than she was letting on, and the thought of her disapproval made me feel even more guilty for not being honest with her.

As I got into the car, I could feel Vincent's eyes on me, studying my every move, and I couldn't help but wonder if he could sense my inner turmoil. I was about to go on a date with him, but all I could think about was how much I wanted to come clean to my family. But as we drove away, I pushed those thoughts to the back of my mind and focused on the present, trying to enjoy this opportunity to get to know Vincent better.

I couldn't help but feel a sense of awkwardness. On the other hand, Vincent seemed cool and collected as he gave me a curt nod, his eyes fixed on the road ahead. He had shed his usual button-up shirt and slacks, instead opting for a relaxed look with a simple gray flannel shirt, the sleeves rolled up, revealing a golden koi fish tattoo wrapped around his arm. The sight of the tattoo, representing Lucas, sent a wave of emotions through me as I wondered about the significance of it and the bond between them.

Vincent drove urgently, taking back roads and avoiding traffic as if we were being chased. As we drove, I couldn't shake off the feeling that he was hiding something from me.

Finally, I mustered the courage to ask, "Why are you driving Lucas's car?"

"I didn't want your parents to question who was picking you up," Vincent replied curtly.

I grimaced, "My mother was asking if you were Lucas."

Vincent cursed under his breath, "I'll park at the end of your driveway next time."



“I’m sorry if I’m making your family life difficult,” Vincent muttered, his eyes focused on the road ahead.

“I’m not liking all the lying,” I whispered, turning to him to see if my unease was causing him discomfort, but his expression remained blank.

“It won’t be forever,” he murmured, turning onto the freeway.

As we drove, I couldn’t help but notice the way Vincent’s grip on the steering wheel tightened, his knuckles turning white as he navigated the busy freeway. His jaw was set, a hint of determination etched in the lines of his face. Yet, I could sense the tension in his body, as if he was carrying a heavy weight on his shoulders.

Despite his stoic exterior, I could see the turmoil brewing beneath the surface. It was clear that the thought of being with me, of getting to know me, was causing him a great deal of stress. I couldn’t help but wonder what was holding him back and causing him so much pain.

“Where are we going exactly?” I asked.

A smile grew on Vincent’s face.



Vincent drove to the next small town over. It was bigger than our own hometown. The shops were many, each with their own unique brand, different from the chain shops that you could find in the mall located between the two settlements. As

we left Lucas's car in the parking lot, Vincent grabbed my hand, leading me out of the town center and taking me down a narrow alleyway from the main street.

A bright sign, Udon Kazoku, shone in the dimly lit alley, pointing towards the stairs leading down to the restaurant.

The small restaurant was filled with rich aromas of spices and smoke, earthy and inviting. The mouthwatering scent of cooking food wafted in the air, making my stomach ache with hunger. The restaurant's main feature was a large bar table that took up most of the space, leaving only a few small tables capable of holding two people.

Vincent nodded to the waitress as he made his way toward the back. The lighting was low, but it felt cozy and private, as no one was back there.

I looked down at the menu with all the different names I didn't recognize, furthering my feeling of being out of place here. Unfortunately, there wasn't enough time before the waitress came over asking what we wanted.

"Just a simple sushi mix." Vincent said, placing his menu down, making the waitress turn to me.

"Err," I panicked, looking down at the menu again. I didn't know what most of these things were. I was about to point and pick randomly before Vincent cut in.

"Try the beef udon," he said, his voice laced with a hint of encouragement. I grabbed onto his suggestion eagerly.

“I’ll have that,” I responded, my smile genuine as I handed the menu to the waitress.

As she left, an uncomfortable silence hung in the air between us. I fidgeted in my seat, my mind scrambling for anything to say.

*What do people normally talk about?*

“It’s getting colder.” I immediately regretted it. If I could have slapped myself, I would have.

*Really? Weather talk?* I mentally groaned, wanting a hole to swallow me.

Vincent blinked, his upper lip twitching as he gave me a slow nod. His lack of effort to engage in conversation made my irritation spike. I couldn’t help but compare him to Lucas, whose easygoing nature made our connection hum with satisfaction. But with Vincent, it felt hard, cold, and empty.

Just because he was part of my social circle didn’t mean I knew him. He was practically a stranger to me. I didn’t know how to act or what to say.

The silence between us was suffocating, consuming any positive feelings I might have had. Of course, it didn’t help that I felt nothing from Vincent, just that icy barrier that always sent a shiver down my spine.

“How did you and Lucas meet?” I asked as soon as the question popped into my head.

“At school, we didn’t really know each other.” Vincent said, his voice tight with disapproval. “I liked to keep to myself, but

I had heard and seen him coming to school hungover often.” A look of disappointment came over his face as if he were a parent unimpressed with their child’s actions.

I tried to hide my smile behind my hand, brushing my lips as my amusement grew. The contrast between Vincent’s tight, rigid structure and Lucas’s laid-back style was stark, like water and oil clashing together and never mixing.

Despite their differences, I couldn’t help but wonder if they could ever work well together. After all, they were members of the same circle.

“So, who found who?” I asked, taking a long sip of my water as the waitress placed it on the table.

Vincent picked up his tall glass of water, his finger tracing over the compressed droplets as he looked off into the distance, lost in thought.

“I did. When I punched him,” he said before taking a drink.

I sputtered into my glass, bubbling the water as I narrowly avoided choking.

“What?” I croaked, a giggle rising in my throat. “You punched him?”

It wasn’t surprising, really. With the way Vincent and Lucas were, I was sure they had and always would have an explosive relationship. With how much they clashed, I was certain a few punches had been thrown around.

“Why?” I asked, my curiosity and intrigue for their past bubbling within me. I couldn’t help but wonder if I had the

right to know. Their relationship and connection were their own. But at the same time, I wanted to understand their inner workings and feelings toward one another.

I longed to be a part of their dynamic.

“He stole something from me,” Vincent replied, his voice cold and sharp like a warning not to delve further. I could sense a barrier rising within our bond, like an ice fortress protecting his emotions.

“I didn’t know he was a thief,” I said, my eyebrows knitting together in confusion.

“Oh, he is. He would take anything you find valuable.” He paused, his expression darkening as he briefly got lost in his own thoughts. “Remember what I told you about him?”

“That he is dangerous?”

Vincent dismissed his previous statement with a wave of his hand, “He can be. Lucas is the most emotional person I have ever met. When he feels, he feels deeply. He craves attention and needs it, no matter the form it comes in. He thrives in it, in fact.”

Vincent’s lips thinned into a tight line as he shook his head in a sigh. “Unfortunately, I didn’t know that about him before I confronted him.”

“And you punched him.”

“Yes.”

I couldn't stop the laugh from trickling out from me. Of course, they would find each other that way.

"Some way to find your circle member." I joked, "Bet Lucas likes to throw that back in your face."

I thought Vincent would laugh along with me, but our connection flared to life.

Vincent's fear and anger washed over me like a powerful wave, stealing my breath and freezing me in place. I desperately clutched at the wooden table, trying to anchor myself against the overwhelming tide of terror that threatened to swallow me whole. It was as if my mind and body had short-circuited, unable to process the intensity of Vincent's feelings.

But as quickly as it came, it went.

Tears streamed down my face as I struggled to catch my breath, my body trembling in the aftermath of Vincent's intense emotions. He took in a shaky breath, the connection between us severed, leaving both of us breathless and reeling from the intensity of what I had just experienced.

"Fuck," Vincent spat out, taking his glasses off to rub his eyes. "I'm sorry, Grace." Vincent's apology was barely audible, his eyes downcast and filled with guilt. I could see his internal struggle, guilt, and shame at losing control and inadvertently hurting me. I wanted to reach out and reassure him, to tell him it was okay, but my own emotions were still too raw.

“It’s okay,” I whispered, still trying to catch my breath. But I didn’t think he heard me as he stared at the table.

I tried to steady my breathing and wipe away the tears. I couldn’t help but think about how different Vincent was from what I had initially perceived. I had always thought of him as emotionless, but at that moment, I realized that his emotions were just as intense and overwhelming as anyone’s, if not more.

*What the hell was that?*

Even as Vincent’s emotions receded, the aftermath left us both feeling drained and shaken.

Our plates were brought out, but I didn’t watch or listen to the waitress as she spoke to Vincent, pointing to his colorful plate filled with many shapes and sizes, and I doubted either of us was listening.

I could still hear the ring echoing in my ears from what had just happened. Vincent was quicker at pulling himself together, his spine was back straight, and the defeated expression vanished like it never existed on his face.

I couldn’t help but feel a sense of unease as I studied him, trying to understand what had triggered our intense emotional connection and why it had turned on me so suddenly.

He seemed completely unfazed as if the emotional outburst had never occurred. I couldn’t help but wonder if he was even aware of our shared connection or if he had simply shut it off to maintain his stoic facade.

I struggled with whether to bring it up or pretend it never happened. I knew that Vincent tended to keep his emotions locked away, but the intensity of what I had felt was overwhelming. It was clear that he needed to open up, but the thought of experiencing that level of emotion again made me uneasy.

*Do I ask what the hell that was, or do I pretend I never felt it?*

My mind whirled, questioning and thinking back at what I had said. Perhaps if Vincent was in tune with our connection, he would have realized my distress, but instead, he leaned forward, placing chopsticks in my hands.

“You hold them like this,” he said, moving my fingers and placing one stick on my lower knuckles. He was obviously choosing the *‘never happened’* route.

I was flimsy when I tried to eat. The thick noodles easily slipped back into the bowl and splattered around like a fish going back into the water, sending droplets around on the table. I couldn’t help but feel a twinge of resentment as I watched him effortlessly handle the utensils while my fingers ached from the effort.

I decided to let go of what had just happened, sensing that Vincent wanted to move on and avoid the topic. I could tell by how he sat, spine straight and stoic expression. I knew that mentioning it outright would only damage his pride, and I didn’t want to do that. So instead, I chose to be tactful and seized the opportunity to get to know him better.



“Can you tell me about your family?” I asked, picking up the thick, well-rounded spoon and dipping it into the beef broth. I hoped we could find some common ground by talking about his family.

Vincent paused for a moment, his frown deepening as he seemed to be weighing his options. I could see the wheels turning in his mind, wondering how much to reveal. But as I lowered my shoulders in disappointment, a flicker of something passed over his eyes, and he sighed.

“I have six siblings,”

“Six?”

Vincent nodded, “I am the youngest, seventh child in my parents’ circle. They’re not a full circle, though.”

“Tell me more about them,” I pressed, my curiosity piqued. I needed to know more, the longing in my chest growing stronger.

Vincent’s lips twitched, almost as if a ghost of a smile was about to settle on his lips. “I have three mothers and one father. It’s very matriarchal. My father is quite a pushover when it comes to my mothers.”

I couldn’t help but smile at the small amusement Vincent found in his father.

I was intrigued as Vincent spoke of his family’s history, my mind racing with questions about their experiences and emotions.

“They must have found each other young to have seven children,” I stated. If Vincent was the youngest, his parents must have settled for a while before having a family with four circle members.

Vincent nodded, taking a moment to chew his food before responding. “My mothers were placed in a match-finding service,” he said, his voice tinged with a hint of resignation. I could sense he’d spoken about this topic many times.

I felt my own eyes widen at the information. I had heard about match-finders before.

It was an old service that was extremely expensive that mostly the rich upper-class paid for. They offered services for finding your circle members, so you didn’t have to. They researched and provided you with travel; all you had to do was touch the people they suggested. Father believed the services were just a scam and only helped the rich find rich circle members.

“My biological mother’s parents paid for her to get a space at the age of six.” Vincent continued, “She then found one of my other mothers at the age of nine, and they were then raised together from there on out.”

I felt a little lightheaded at the sense I was getting from Vincent’s family. I could already see the signs of the tightly packed expectations that he had mentioned.

“They found one more at a later date, and funny enough, my father was the last to be found, by chance, that was. He was a middle-class boy whose mother was a maid for one of my

mother's family houses. She brought him with her one day and made him stay in the kitchen." Vincent's eyes crinkled with amusement. "I believe my father is still in shock to this day about how he found three of his circle members at the same time."

"I can imagine," I said with a laugh, my heart feeling lighter as I shared in Vincent's amusement.

"My biological mother's parents took him in, gave him an education, and laid out a path they all expected him to travel," Vincent said, sounding like he was about to stop.

But I wanted more.

"Is having six siblings hard?" Maybe it was a stupid question, but Vincent was opening up, and I was a person desperate for water in a desert. I needed to know more about him.

Vincent hesitated for a moment, his throat bobbing as he took a sip of water before he spoke.

"I wouldn't really know. I don't have much contact with them. They all have their own lives, families, and successes," he said with a hint of detachment.

I couldn't help but feel a tinge of sadness at the thought of Vincent being disconnected from his siblings. If I had siblings, I knew I would want them to be a part of my life.

"That's kind of sad. Don't you miss them?" I questioned.

Vincent raised a brow, "Not really. There is a huge age gap between us. So they weren't around much. I'm the youngest, a

mistake as it were,” he shrugged, picking up another piece of sushi.

“I’m sure that’s not true,” I said, trying to offer some form of comfort.

“It is.” He said directly with a matter-of-fact tone, “My mothers’ wanted two children each. That was their plan, but my biological mother accidentally became pregnant with me. One of the reasons why there is such an age difference.” He spoke like being called an accident was nothing.

I felt a lump form in my throat, not knowing how to respond to that. Vincent’s words were heavy, and the weight of them was palpable in the air.

“I also went to a match-finding service, which brought more distance between my siblings and me,” he added.

“You were also in a match-finding service?” I repeated, my voice rising in shock.

Vincent’s gaze dropped to the table as he whispered, “For a little while.” He hesitated, “They placed me when I was five. I had a nanny and a tutor and traveled around the world. Moving when the company told me to move, meeting so many other children and their families, going to playgroups and, as I got older, going to parties.”

“Your parents weren’t with you?”

Vincent gave a short laugh, shaking his head, “God, no. They’d already been through this with my older siblings. They believed it would be a good experience for me. Not many have

the opportunity to see the world and find their circle members.”

“You must have been lonely,” I couldn’t help but frown as I imagined a child-like Vincent traveling to new countries, not surrounded by his family, but by strangers. He must have been scared.

Vincent smiled softly, “A little, but it’s what I grew up with.”

“You didn’t know any better,” I muttered, thinking of my own childhood. While I was kept away from the world, Vincent had the complete opposite experience.

“Precisely,” he gave me another smile that felt like melting ice. “But after years of traveling and meeting people, I convinced my mother to stop the search. So I applied for our school three years ago and haven’t left.”

“And then you found two of us,” I said, trying to wrap my head around his story.

“It’s a little amusing when you think about it,” Vincent said with a grin, but I could see the shadows in his eyes and the hint of sadness behind his words.

Vincent had had opportunities only a few could afford. His parents practically paid for a round-the-world trip with a service to help him find his circle members. But only when he stopped he found us.

“Were you sad that you didn’t find any of us?” I asked, poking at the thick noodles, my question turning my stomach.

Vincent contemplated his answer carefully, his eyes focused on his plate as he weighed his words. “I never really thought about it,” he finally said, his voice low and thoughtful. “There are so many people worldwide, I just assumed I wouldn’t find anyone. When I pulled myself back from looking, I knew my chances of finding them would naturally decrease further.”

I couldn’t help but feel a pang of disappointment at his words. “I bet it would be easier to have a circle from that type of life,” I said softly.

“It would have been easier,” Vincent conceded, his expression unreadable.

The thought of not being good enough for Vincent’s family gnawed at me.

“Would your parents find Lucas and I displeasing?” I asked hesitantly, unable to meet Vincent’s gaze.

“My mothers wouldn’t find anyone good enough by their social standards,” Vincent said with a shrug.

*I wouldn’t be good enough,* I thought, a sinking feeling in my stomach. I knew I wasn’t perfect, but the thought of one of my circle member’s families not liking me was a bitter pill to swallow.

*Did Lucas’s dads even like me?*

Vincent wiped his perfectly clean mouth with a napkin, then proceeded to fold it neatly and gently reached for my hand over the table. I couldn’t help but eye my own napkin. The crumpled ball lay ruined next to my bowl.

“They will find you shapeable. They’d find you naive, and that’s how they would dig their claws into you. They would force you into a hardened mold that would suffocate you. Lucas, on the other hand, would have another type of experience. He would be cast out once they realized they couldn’t control him. He would be that stain that people know is there but ignore.”

“That’s... horrible,” I said, my voice trailing off as I struggled to find the right words.

“That is my family,” Vincent replied, his tone heavy with disappointment. “I would say my siblings are better, but that would be a lie. They live by the same standards as our parents: money, power, and security.”

“And what standards do you live by?” I asked, trying to understand more about the person sitting across from me.

“I am my parents’ son,” Vincent said, his voice heavy with resignation. “I have been shaped to strive for what my parents deem important.” But then, a flicker of something else appeared in his eyes, a glimmer of hope. “But then I met Lucas. My views have somewhat shifted since we found each other.”

But this fleeting moment of warmth was quickly replaced by a hardened look as if a cold draft had seeped into the space between us.

“But it’s hard to break out of what you know, who you were brought up to be,” Vincent said, his gray eyes now cold and detached.

*But who do you want to be?* My mind asked, but I had a slight sense that Vincent wasn't sure yet.

At that moment, I felt more connected to Vincent than ever before. I wasn't from a wealthy family, but I, too, had expectations placed on me by my parents. Though they've given me more freedom now, I still felt like I was trying to discover who I truly was. What did I want to be? What kind of person was I? Each day felt like a process of unwrapping layers, but I still didn't have all the answers.

"What do your siblings do?" I asked, trying to steer the conversation in a more neutral direction.

Vincent's lips twisted into a bitter smile as he listed off his siblings' impressive careers, "Doctor, lawyer, investment banker, professor, engineer, and even a scientist." And then, with biting sarcasm, he added, "And here I am playing catch up."

"Wow, that's..."

"A great achievement?" Vincent interjected, his voice dripping with sarcasm. I could feel his words sting, like sharp twigs scratching at my skin. Even the way he curled his lip in disgust made it seem like he had a bad taste in his mouth. He quickly picked up his glass and downed it.

"A lot," I said, my voice trailing off from his sneering expression. "Personally, I couldn't handle that kind of pressure. But I'm sure your parents must be proud of their accomplishments," I added, giving him a small, encouraging smile.



But my words had the opposite effect. Vincent's face twisted in anger, his cheeks flushing a furious pink. Was he jealous of his siblings' success? I couldn't be sure, but the scowl on his face made it clear that I had said something wrong.

"I don't want to talk about them anymore," he muttered, picking up his chopsticks and returning to his meal.

The disappointment and regret settled heavily on me, like a weight pulling me down. I wished I could take back my words, but it was too late. I watched as Vincent's wall went back up, shutting me out once again. But even as I felt the disappointment, I couldn't help but feel a glimmer of understanding. I had learned more about Vincent at this moment than I ever had before.

Vincent cleared his throat, drawing my attention back to him. "What do your parents do?" he asked softly, a small olive branch to mend our conversation. "I know about your mother and the one that works at school."

I took a deep breath, grateful for the change of subject. "That's Papa- Philip. My other dads, Father- Tobias, is an estate agent. Da-Graham is a handyman. He doesn't have a steady job but takes on odd jobs around the town."

Vincent nodded his full attention on me. "And your last dad?"

"Roger. He's a stay-at-home dad. But I think he's looking into taking some cooking courses," I added, thinking of the leaflets I had recently found in one of Roger's drawers.

Sitting across from Vincent, I couldn't shake the feeling of unease. We had a bond, but it felt like we were always on opposite sides and never quite able to bridge the gap between us. I desperately wanted to understand and be understood by him, but I knew finding common ground would be no easy task.

I hesitated before speaking, feeling like I was approaching a wild animal backed into a corner. Vincent's head snapped up towards me, his eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"Can we please talk about our bond?" I asked softly, my voice trembling with fear. I knew I had already missed many opportunities to open up, but I couldn't help but feel that trying again couldn't make things worse.

Vincent didn't look up from his sushi. He toyed with his chopsticks, his fingers flexing as he prepared to grab another piece.

"What about it?" he said, his voice flat and unyielding.

"Why didn't you tell me about you in the first place?" I pressed, my heart pounding in my chest.

Vincent shut his eyes tightly as if a headache was forming behind them. But after a moment, he opened them again, his steel-gray gaze fixed firmly on me.

"I didn't want you to feel like you are feeling now," he said, laying down his chopsticks. "I didn't want you to wait on the sidelines while I got my shit together. It's already hard for Lucas, and I didn't want to add that to you."

“But I should have known,” I countered. “It isn’t your right to withhold something from me because you think my feelings will get hurt. I’m a big girl. I can handle it.”

I wasn’t sure if I was getting him to see my point of view or not. Vincent wasn’t stupid. In fact, he was one of the smartest people at school. He must have known that what he did was wrong, no matter what he thought was right at the time.

“Lucas told me why you’re closed off,” I said, trying to tread carefully, but still, my words jolted Vincent like a slap to the face. His gray eyes blazed like molten metal while a look of pure anger and betrayal spread across his features.

“What has he told you?” I couldn’t help but feel uneasy as I noticed his eyes continuing to glimmer with a cold, fiery heat.

“That he got burned,” I replied. “How did it happen?”

Vincent’s face turned ashen, his hand gripping his chopsticks tightly. He knew how it happened. He had felt it alongside Lucas.

“I’m sure he’ll tell you when he’s ready,” Vincent muttered, looking down at his hands before picking up his chopsticks again in an attempt to keep them busy.

“He also told me that you felt it too,” I pressed.

“Yeah, I did,” Vincent said, still not looking up at me. A feeling of pity washed over me, making my stomach feel hollow despite having just eaten. I couldn’t even imagine the overwhelming pain they must have felt.

“It must have been difficult,” I whispered, my throat threatening to close at the thought of both of them hurting. “Feeling each other normally is overwhelming. I can’t even imagine.”

“No, you can’t,” Vincent snapped, his eyes locking onto mine again. His jaw jumped as he exhaled hard, “And you never will because it’s something I’ll never allow any of us to go through again.”

“What you and Lucas experienced was dreadful, but it shouldn’t stop you from feeling your bonds,” I said, trying to understand.

“Have you ever been burned?” Vincent asked suddenly, placing his chopsticks down and gripping the table’s edge. The raw emotion in his voice was palpable, and his pain was tangible.

I shook my head, trying to comprehend the weight of Vincent’s words. The unease inside me grew, choking me as the dread built.

“There are no words to describe it. But it was nothing short of excruciating pain. Not only did I feel it, but I had to witness and help Lucas during his recovery. He was in pain every day, and nothing helped. No medicine, no soothing touch or words, nothing helped. Even a simple breeze would flare up his burns, and he would pass out from the pain again and again. So, I blocked our connection for his recovery, and every time I opened it up, I felt that blazing pain erupt again. I-”

Vincent's voice choked off, his knuckles turning pure white under the pressure he was exerting on the wood below his fingertips.

"I didn't mean to hurt you before, earlier." He said suddenly, his tone shifting to a less intense one. He obviously changed the subject to one he deemed easier to talk about. But I couldn't blame him. I don't know how I would handle experiencing and recalling the trauma they both went through.

Because that's what Vincent was suffering from, trauma.

I shook my head, reaching for his hand. The need to comfort my circle member was overpowering.

"You didn't hurt me, Vincent. It was overwhelming, yes. But can you see how bad it is to hold yourself back? We three can work on this. We could have sessions on opening up. Do a few seconds each day and extend it gradually. You can't keep locking yourself up. Otherwise, this might keep happening."

"I will have a better grip on it." He promised, but it was a promise in the wrong direction. We needed him to open up, not retreat further.

"You will damage our connection, Vincent."

"I can't damage something imaginary."

I sucked in a breath, feeling a sharp pang in my chest at his dismissive words.

"I didn't mean it that way," Vincent said, his voice tight with conflicting emotions. "I know what we are to each other. I can't deny what I feel and know deep inside me. But there is

no proof that you can damage that invisible mental connection. It's all propaganda, a way to control and shape us by making sure we are always open to each other."

"I know what I feel," I said, trying to keep my emotions in check. "If you would just open up and feel it, you would see."

"I can't," Vincent replied, his voice tight with tension.

"I understand your reluctance, Vincent," I began, my voice quivering with emotion. "The thought of opening up and exposing yourself to potential pain and hurt is scary."

"I'm not scared," Vincent spat, but his words rang false. He couldn't fool me, not after all the emotion I had felt earlier. He was scared, scared to feel the pain the bond had made him feel before.

"It's okay if you are. I am, too," I said, trying to understand and empathize with his fear.

Vincent's gray eyes met mine, his expression softening. "Why are you scared?" He asked, his tone gentle and curious.

"For us mainly," I began, my voice shaking. "I'm scared of messing up and ruining our relationship before we can even try. I'm scared of becoming bitter, Vincent. I've seen what distrust and regret can do to a circle. I've seen it in my parents, my mother's clients, and I've even experienced it myself."

Tears stung my eyes as I spoke of my fears and worries. "I don't want that for any of us. I don't want to live in a resentful circle, but I'm scared it will be. And then there will be nothing we can do because we have no choice but to stay together. It's

one of the reasons I'm nervous to talk to you. Because I don't want to say something for you both to resent me," I said, my voice trembling with emotion.

A sense of embarrassment washed over me as I couldn't control my emotions. "God, I'm so stupid," I tried to force out a laugh, but it ended in a choked sob. I tried to wipe away my tears, but they just kept flowing.

Vincent came over and squatted before me. His eyes were the softest yet, the gray in his eyes light and warm, and he looked kind as he gazed up at me.

"You are not stupid," Vincent said softly, his hands brushing mine away, allowing him to cup my face. His thumbs were gentle as he wiped away the salty tears.

"Perhaps a little bit, but not for the reason you think," he added, making me laugh through my tears. I knew I could count on Vincent to tell the honest truth.

"Nothing you say will truly get us to resent you, Grace. I want you to tell me how you feel, and I'm sorry for making you feel like you can't do that with me," he said, his voice sincere.

I tried not to focus on his hands. They felt like fire as he rubbed my thighs with them, making me extremely aware of his touches.

"Let's get out of here and talk more," he murmured, standing up and bringing me up with him.

As we exited the restaurant after Vincent paid, the autumn gloom enveloped us with its chilly, moist cold air.

“I’m sorry if this date wasn’t good enough,” Vincent said as we approached the parking lot. “While I have been to many match-finder meetings and parties, I haven’t ever been on a date like this before,” he added, a light shade of pink blooming on his cheeks as he confessed.

“Not even with Lucas?” I asked.

“God no,” Vincent replied with a burst of laughter. “A Lucas-type date is my worst nightmare. He told me he took you jumping off the cliff at the lake,” Vincent shook his head, looking down at our clasped hands. “He will either die young out of stupidity or take us to an early grave.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at his words, and Vincent’s features softened as he watched me with a small smile on his lips. We stood there silently for a moment, but it was no longer awkward. It was filled with a content ease that enveloped us like a gust of wind. I could feel a rising anticipation from Vincent as his hand held mine, his thumb rubbing the top of mine in small circles.

“I’m not Lucas, Grace,” Vincent said softly, still looking down at our connected hands. “I’m not the type to whisk you off your feet. I won’t dance with you, take you on picnics, or be spontaneous. I’m not a smooth talker, and I won’t say the right words you wish to hear from me. I’m not any of those romantic things, Grace,” Vincent said, raising his head, his thumb still stroking mine as our eyes held each other. His



grays were filled with pain, a longing for something hidden deep.

“I wish I was... But I’m not,” he spoke with a heavy sigh. “I see how easygoing Lucas is with you, and I am man enough to admit that I’m jealous. But I’m not like that because that’s not me. I can’t give you any of that. But I can give you my loyalty, and I will do anything to ensure our circle is protected and safe. Because that’s the only thing I’ve got,” Vincent said with certainty.

“Vincent, I don’t want you to be another Lucas. We have him, and Lucas and I have you. All I want from our circle is honesty. Can you give me that?” I asked, looking at him with vulnerability.

“Yes. You will always have my honesty,” he replied, his expression serious.

“Will you ever open the bond?”

Vincent’s expression wavered as if he was trying to hide a trace of nervousness. “Yes, but give me time,” he said, his voice tinged with hesitation.

I could see through his facade. I knew he was scared. But I wanted to be there for him, to help him. “I know you find it difficult, but I’m here, Vincent. Both Lucas and I are here,” I said soothingly.

Vincent’s shoulders relaxed as if my words had settled him. I didn’t want to blink. I was afraid I would never witness this side of Vincent ever again.

“I know. But I need to work on it on my own,” he said, his stubbornness still present.

“Will you come to me if you need help?” I asked, my tone gentle.

Vincent gave me another soft, tender smile, his hand brushing off a few hair strands from my face. “Yes, Grace, I will tell you. I love how considerate you are,” he said, his words warm and genuine.

“I want to help my circle members,” I replied, feeling a sense of pride.

“I know. I still feel the left-over shock when you were willing to open your circle to me even when you thought I was a Mundane,” Vincent said, his words reminding me of the past.

“I wanted Lucas to be happy,” Brushing off his praise.

“Can I kiss you?” Vincent asked, his voice low and intimate. He was so close that his hot breath washed over me, making my lips tingle with a need I was starting to get used to.

I could only nod, my breath leaving me, taking my ability to talk.

With another smile, Vincent crowded me, bringing his lips to mine. The taste of salt lingered on his lips, reminding me of when I went on a boat ride and the salty sea air whipped around me. Its gale was a powerful, controlled force that came with a sting of cold, wet droplets, but it was a small price to pay to feel the freedom it offered.

That was Vincent. He was a controlled tornado storm, and kissing him made me feel like an adrenaline junkie needing another hit.

We were both breathless when we broke apart. Vincent's hands still continued to touch me, soft and cool caresses on my neck and face. He looked at me like I was to be treasured, his warm gray eyes shimmering as they took me in, and I soaked in his attention in return.

But then, I noticed a man standing and watching us from across the road, not even trying to hide that he was observing us intently.

For a moment, I thought he wasn't interested in us as his sunglasses covered his eyes, but the small smirk on his lips made it clear that he was not a passerby. My stomach turned at the thought of this stranger witnessing mine and Vincent's intimate moment. I felt my cheeks burn with embarrassment as I forced myself to look down.

I watched him from the corner of my eyes as he made everyone walk around him. He could have easily blended in, but instead, he was standing out in the open, his frank expression a mix of amusement and relaxation. The way he looked at us was like he knew us, but I knew for a fact that I had never seen him before.

Who was this stranger?

He was dressed in a dark brown leather jacket that looked soft and well-worn like it was his favorite and always wore it. His jeans were also worn-down, giving him the look of

someone who just woke up and threw on whatever they found. Even his dark brown hair looked messy, but the stubble on his chin was neatly trimmed. He had a style that looked rough but in a deliberate way.

I faced him again, frowning as he raised a hand and gave me a little wave, causing my breath to hitch.

“What is it?” Vincent asked, frowning at me before turning to see what I was staring at. Then, it was Vincent’s turn to sharply inhale before he let out a curse under his breath.

“Go wait in the car, Grace.” He ordered, lifting his keys in the air for me to take.

“Who is he?” I asked, unable to take my eyes off this stranger.

He waved again, his smirk turning into a wide smile like he found us amusing. His head was more turned toward Vincent. He looked even more smug now that he had caught Vincent’s eye.

“Fucking hell. Get in the car.” Vincent cursed again, his tone final. There was no room for questioning, only for following his orders.

I got in the car, watching as Vincent hurried towards the man. His strides were long and rapid. His back held a straight tension, his hands deep in his pockets as if trying to appear relaxed.

Clearly, Vincent knew the stranger and didn’t appreciate his presence.

They stood there for a while, talking in hushed tones. Vincent, even with his back towards me, looked stiff. His shoulders were half raised while his fists clenched and unclenched. On the other hand, the stranger looked at ease, his expression close to amusement as he chewed his gum.

Their conversation didn't last long till Vincent made his way back to the car, all under the watchful gaze of the stranger. Vincent slammed his door shut, bringing a heavy silence between us.

His hands grasped the steering wheel tightly, his knuckles white as he breathed heavily in an agitated manner. The tension in the car was palpable, and I could sense Vincent's anger and frustration emanating from him.

It was clear that this encounter with the stranger had deeply affected him, and I couldn't help but wonder who he was and what their relationship was.

"Are you okay?" I asked as we both watched the man. But after another wave, he turned and walked off, instantly blending into the bundle of people walking around.

Vincent took a moment to breathe before turning to me, "If you ever see that guy, Grace. I want you to tell me. Understand?"

"Yeah, sure. But who is he?" I whispered, not liking how someone could cause this much of a reaction out of Vincent.

"A complication." He said simply, turning the car on and saying nothing else for an explanation.

What else was Vincent hiding?

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## GRACE

“Come on, give me the details!” Lucas pleaded, his voice tinged with excitement. Students around us sent us curious glances, while others turned up their noses with disdain as Lucas passed by. We both ignored the stares as I tried not to laugh at Lucas’s attempts to pry information from me.

He had been hounding me since I returned from my date with Vincent. But it had reached a new level of intensity since he showed up at my house this morning before school. According to him, it was my turn to drive us to school. I didn’t understand why he drove to the opposite side of town, going further from our school to come to my place, just to demand a ride.

But this was Lucas. I really shouldn’t question his logic.

I couldn’t help but shake my head and laugh at his antics. His infectious energy was hard to resist.

“Did he take you to the third base bay?” He asked, wiggling his blonde eyebrows suggestively.

His pierced brow glinted along with his soul, which was bursting with excitement. It reminded me of fireworks, each one exploding with a crackle of sound and light, filling my chest with warmth. It was almost enough to make me forget about the cold, closed-off place where Vincent's part should be.

“What?” Lucas asked, pulling me out of my thoughts. “Don't tell me he took you to home run creek?” He exclaimed, feigning shock.

“Those aren't real places,” I muttered, placing my books inside my locker. I refused to believe those were the actual names people used.

“They are. The first place I took you is called self-will hill. Every townie knows it's the first base spot to go,” Lucas said, a hint of pride in his voice as he reminded me of our shared memories at the secluded spot.

I couldn't help but tease him, “It's a shame your self-will seems lacking today.” I smiled, enjoying the playful banter between us.

But my words seemed to hit a nerve as Lucas stumbled backward, clutching his chest in mock shock. “Your words, Guppy, they can be lethal if you're not careful,” he exclaimed.

As I closed my locker, I raised an eyebrow at my circle member, trying to feel his true emotions. But despite his playful front, I could sense a hint of mischief and excitement within our bond.



“Is it my fault if I’m just telling the truth?” I asked, unable to resist ribbing him further.

Lucas scoffed at my words, “Fine, in the name of honesty, I made that last one up. It’s just you, me, and him who go there.” His eyes darted around before he lowered his voice. “The other townies think, and I quote, ‘It’s a boring place. There are more fun places to jump from’.” He mimicked their whiny tone, making me chuckle as we made our way slowly to the cafeteria.

“Well, at least it’s a quiet place for us,” I said, a hint of nostalgia in my voice. I didn’t want anyone else to know about the abandoned picnic spot on top of the cliff edge. It held a special meaning to me for multiple reasons.

“Hmm, perhaps I shall advertise the location, but my lips may remain sealed if you give me what I want,” he said, entering the large hall. Only a few students were already trickling in for lunch.

“Is that blackmail I sense coming from you, Mr. Moore?” I asked as he led us to the back of the half-full cafeteria, where fewer people were sitting.

“I’m a desperate guy,” he joked, taking a seat next to me. Our knees brushed against each other.

“And you haven’t even said please,” I added.

“Please give me something. I did get you that date; I’m practically your wingman at this point,” he said, his voice curving in a way that drew me in.

I knew he wanted to know all the details, but as much as I was enjoying our game, I couldn't help but want something that was only mine and Vincent's. Like the many things, I was sure Lucas and Vincent would have done together without me.

It made me feel guilty for holding back from him. I could taste his lingering jealousy on the tip of my tongue. He was trying to hide it, but I could feel it. The twinge of envy he felt towards mine and Vincent's relationship made his words and actions more desperate and pushy.

Lucas was ecstatic that we were sorting things out, but I could feel his longing to be involved, which only sent a stab of jealousy through his stomach as his self-hate echoed within me. He didn't want to be jealous, but at the same time, he didn't want to be left behind.

It was exactly how I felt.

We were only human, and jealousy was still an emotion we all felt, even between other circle members. It would be a hurdle we all had to face and conquer. We had to find a balance that fits well with us.

"We went out to lunch in the next town over," I started, purposely ignoring Lucas's inner turmoil by forcing myself to swallow the slight hint of bitterness emanating from him.

"How incredibly... Vincent," he said with a wrinkle of his nose. "Guess we both know who the best dater is out of him and me."

“There is no singular best,” I snapped, thinking about Vincent’s worries about competing with Lucas. I had to put a stop to that right away. We were fragile as it was, and rivalry wouldn’t help stabilize us. “It’s not a competition. I liked each of your activities.”

“Only liked? Guess we’re not doing a good job if we can’t get love from you,” Lucas said, giving me his wide smile that always made my stomach flutter from his attention.

*Of course, that’s what he latched onto,* I thought with an amused huff.

“What did you guys talk about?” Lucas asked, leaning forward into my space.

When Lucas did this, he always made me feel like we were the only people in the world. His attention could drown out the people around us, making me feel secure only with him. He was a chaotic beauty, and he was mine.

“We spoke about his family,” I said reluctantly, pulling away slightly to clear my mind and attempting to cool my cheeks with my cold hands.

“They’re bigger assholes than Vincent himself, and that’s saying something,” Lucas said with a smirk, obviously knowing the reason for my reaction. “But I like to think I helped dilute his assholery when we found each other. You’re welcome, by the way,” Lucas said.

He leaned back, relaxing into his chair, spreading his legs wide, caging me with them. His relaxed posture would have

you believe that the god he was named after was in the flesh, but I knew that alter ego was a front, no matter how vain he could be.

I looked away, taking a moment to gather my thoughts, but my mind kept replaying Vincent's words, causing a smile to play on my lips.

"What?" Lucas asked, his gaze burning with curiosity as my stomach fluttered excitedly.

"He did mention gaining a different perspective since he found you," I said honestly, studying Lucas's reaction closely.

A hint of red tinged his cheeks as he brushed his hair out of his eyes, his emotions shifting as a wave of vulnerability washed over him.

*There was the true Lucas.*

"Of course, he did. I'm amazing," Lucas said, trying to mask his true feelings of insecurity with a cocky front.

"I'm just seeing the brighter side." He said with a rush, "Your date was the first step of us all coming together." I could feel Lucas's chest brimming with fullness. His excitement was infectious, and my own emotions sparked with joy because it was a step in the right direction.

But then a shadow cast over his mind, dimming that spark of excitement as he struggled to find the courage to reveal something important to me.

"Grace, there is something I've been working up the courage to tell you," He said, his voice strained.

A tray slammed on our table, making us both jolt and turn to see Julia and Hannah holding expressions of dread. They weren't the only ones, as Lucas dropped his gaze, ashamed. I knew whatever he was about to say wouldn't be told in front of our friends.

"The SCC talk is happening today," Julia said, her voice heavy with dread. "Our last lesson will be replaced by the talk."

"And here I am, wanting math instead of bible talk." Lucas sighed before turning to me and offering to get me lunch.

"Is that why people are..." I left the question hanging once Lucas left our table.

It didn't need further explaining. The atmosphere in the school halls was thick with tension, an overwhelming shift in the air that left some students feeling uneasy and on edge. Normal friend groups were broken up, scattered around, looking quiet and subdued, as if the school had become a funeral.

I couldn't help but suspect the reason for this change.

"Today is tense, but wait until tomorrow. Normally that is the worst day," Julia muttered.

"Are the talks really that bad?" I asked hesitantly.

"It depends on who you ask," Julia explained, her eyes darkening with anger and sadness. "Most kids here are from families who believe in the SCC way, but there are a few

others who don't and are only here to find their circle members.”

Hannah nodded in agreement, her face contorting in disgust. “It can get a bit tense when views clash,” she added.

I already knew that some of the people here had different views. I'd heard the slurs that some people called Mundane, along with anyone who sympathized with them, casually thrown around the halls.

“But some teachers still love to drill their views into us,” Hannah muttered, rolling her eyes.

I had also witnessed Lucas getting viciously criticized for his past activities while the teachers here did nothing, and some even encouraged it.

“Especially when other schools come over to visit,” she added as Lucas placed a plate of fries in front of me.

He sat down with a forced, lackluster laugh, shaking his head, “A little reminder to spread the SCC ways.”

I asked uncertainty, “Is that what they want? For us to recruit?”

Lucas interjected, “Think of it like the group sessions we had, but not only will it be about how we should be together, but also about what we should be like in general.” He spoke dryly.

Julia counted the rules on her fingers, “Like, no closing yourself off to the community, but don't express too much as it's rude to your circle members. No holding your last name

till you find all your circle members. And most definitely no fornication outside of your circle.”

“Oh yeah, don’t want anymore Mundanes overtaking everything,” Hannah said sarcastically, her black-painted lips curling into a snarl of distaste.

“Let’s hope the secret Mundane in this school remains hidden,” Julia whispered, her eyes flicking behind me.

I turned to see where her eyes went too.

Vincent stood at the entrance, his eyes scanning the crowded cafeteria blankly. Many speculated that his cold demeanor was due to him being a Mundane, and his standoffish attitude only reinforced the stereotype of what people expected a Mundane to be: a soulless being incapable of holding any emotions.

But I knew better. He was mine and Lucas’s, with a part of us inside him and vice versa.

As soon as Vincent felt my gaze on him, his gray eyes met mine. The blank expression on his face softened, and his sharp features relaxed. I longed to know what he was thinking and feeling at that moment.

*Did he hate the wall he had placed between us too?*

I didn’t know what he thought at that moment or what he felt, but I longed for him to open up.

Suddenly, another girl, Jessica, approached him and latched onto his arm, her expression dull and glassy. I couldn’t help but watch as he looked down at her, his expression of surprise

like she got the jump on him, but it swiftly changed to understanding as he leaned close and said something to her.

I knew she suffered from Phantom bond, a mental illness that made her believe she had found her circle members, and she still believed that Vincent was one of them.

My stomach ached at her touching him so freely, and I couldn't help but secretly wish she would latch onto someone else. But as I saw the confusion in her eyes and how her brow furrowed as she looked down at her hands on his bare arm, I knew her mind was battling with itself. She truly believed she had found part of her soul. How lost and vulnerable she must feel when she would come to the realization they weren't for her.

The pity I felt for her grew.

“The SCC is all about finding their members' circles as quickly as possible. They believe that you cannot truly live a full, fulfilling life until you have found your circle,” Julia's voice pulled me back into our conversation.

My head was spinning, trying to remember what we were talking about, before I got distracted by the sight of Vincent.

“What she's trying to say,” Hannah said slowly, noticing my confused expression, “is that people who haven't found anyone from their circle yet are seen as unfavored, unworthy in the SCC's eyes. We wouldn't hold a standing position if Julia and I were part of a Sacred Circle Community. We wouldn't have a say or a vote.”



“We would be practically invisible,” Julia muttered, her voice filled with disappointment. “I’ve heard rumors that they kick people out when they take too long to find their circle. Then, they demand that their families shun them until they find their circle as a form of ‘motivation.’”

The weight of their words hit me hard, making my chest ache with the realization of our precarious situation. I longed to do something, anything, to help us find the peace and security that I craved.

“That’s horrible,” I said, understanding what my mother was fighting against.

Her battle to allow individuality in one’s circle was a continuous fight. She believed that putting your needs and thoughts before your circle was the way forward. She didn’t find letting your circle be your entire world practical or healthy. It was a new outlook that some people were starting to live by, but for most, their circle was everything.

“Perhaps we should join, Guppy,” Lucas said with a mischievous grin as he sent a look in Hannah’s direction. “I like the thought of being better than Hannah.”

I cringed with a laugh as our friends pelted fries at Lucas.



A frenzy overtook the school just before the last hour hit. The chaos of students rushing to one of the bigger classrooms for the SCC talk was overwhelming, and I had lost Lucas and my

friends in the commotion. I was one of the earlier people who got out of the crowd, along with Kai.

As soon as our eyes met, Kai and I both froze on the spot.

The color of his cheeks reddened before instantly draining to white, making the freckles all over his face appear darker. The way his eyes widened when he saw me, you would have thought I was in the hall screaming like a lunatic, rushing toward him, but we were both stunned into silence.

My mind raced with thoughts of how to interact with him, but even in my imagination, I could see his face flush red and him hurrying away from me.

Just like he was doing now.

My heart ached with disappointment and regret as I watched him disappear into the classroom without a word.

“Grace.” Dylan’s voice came from behind me like a sigh of relief.

Turning around, I could see the tension in Dylan’s shoulders ease. He walked towards me hesitantly, a shyness consuming us both. This was our first time alone since the day in the music room.

I couldn’t help but feel guilty for not thinking about Dylan more. Vincent and Lucas had taken up most of my thoughts since that day.

“Dylan,” I tried not to let my voice sound too breathless, causing his infectious smile to be wide, showing his dimple pressed against his chin.

“I’m sorry,” he blurted out before silence could come between us. “I know it seemed like I was avoiding you, but I was embarrassed. And then I heard you were ill, and I tried to work out what to say, but I froze. I had this whole speech in my head, and now I’m messing that up. Please tell me to shut up anytime because I feel like I need to stop talking.”

Dylan’s words were a mix of apology and embarrassment. It was one of the reasons I had grown to like him. But, even with his popularity, he still was awkward. Which I could relate to on a personal level.

He made me feel normal.

“It’s okay,” I said, giving him a weak smile, “I’m the one who should apologize to you.”

“What?” Dylan asked in alarm. His brows furrowed downwards, confused, “Why?”

“For the way Lucas spoke to you,” I said, cringing at the memory of how Lucas postured at Dylan in the music room. The look of fury on his face once he caught us touching.

When I willingly touched him.

“You should never apologize for your circle member, Grace,” Dylan said with a hint of sadness in his voice. “He has his own mind, and besides,” he gave me a loose shrug, “It’s all understandable. I’ve known for a long time that Apollo wasn’t a part of my circle. I just got caught up with the thought that maybe I was wrong.”

“I was the one who touched you, Dylan,” I said, not wanting him to feel like he was to blame.

“Yeah, but I *like* you, Grace,” he said in a low voice with a hint of longing. His eyes shifted around, scared of anyone hearing him say something so taboo.

“I like you too, Dylan,” I said just as quietly.

“That’s what makes this worse. Because I saw us together. I could picture being with you, and my head just got caught up in that moment I had imagined.” He rubbed his forehead with a sigh.

“I imagined, too,” I said quietly, blushing as I revealed my own secret. “But I have my circle, and you have yours,” I said, reminding us both that we would never be.

“I know,” Dylan gave a weak smile that didn’t reach his eyes, “Still friends?” he asked, his voice filled with uncertainty.

“Yes,” I said, my heart heavy, knowing that friendship was all we could ever have.

“Dylan,” Lucas said, his tone sharp and filled with disapproval, but Dylan didn’t look shocked by his sudden appearance.

Instead, he gave Lucas a charming smile filled with pleantry, “Apollo, I just want to apologize if I caused any discomfort to you and your circle.”

“No discomfort here,” Lucas said, his tone tight as he tried to hide his anger. I could practically see the little green goblin

of jealousy peeking behind his eyes. I tugged at our bond, hoping to rein him in slightly, but his insecurity continued burning inside him.

“Smooth, Apollo, smooth,” Hannah said dryly as she walked between the two guys.

Her march forced Lucas to step back while she headed towards the classroom door along with a quiet Kristina and Julia, who was trying to stifle her snorts at Lucas’s glare that he sent them. But he said nothing as we all went inside the classroom.

“Looks like the holy boy is a little green under his collar,” Lucas whispered next to me as we sat down close to the back. His statement brought my eyes to a sickly pale-looking Andrew. A gleam of sweat was on his brow, no matter how often he wiped at it with his dark blue handkerchief. His eyes flickered around the class with a nervous gaze.

I grimaced, feeling sorry for him, “Do you think we should say something?” I asked unsurely.

I really didn’t want him to faint during his talk.

“Nah, I’m sure he will be fine. He got picked for a reason, right?” Lucas said, but even he looked unsure, his concerns for Andrew clear on his face.

I wasn’t too sure either, but as soon as I was about to express my thoughts, Mrs. Mason came stumbling in, holding her own tower of papers in her arms. Her huffing and puffing

for breath reddened her loose cheeks, and I couldn't help but feel a twinge of pity for her.

*Was it normal for her to be in these talks?* I wondered, watching her settle at the side of the teacher's desk where Andrew had placed all his notes. He looked even more stricken than before at the sight of her.

I felt Vincent before he entered. His sure stride ate up the distance to his chair, causing my heart to race as he sat close to us. Despite my attempts to remain composed, I couldn't help but feel a flutter of excitement and nervousness at him being so close.

"What a cold shithead," Lucas said under his breath, not even trying to lower his voice. I tried not to smile when I noticed the stiff rise of Vincent's shoulders, wondering how hard it must be for him to keep his cool with Lucas's constant jabs.

"I bet he shits pure ice. No wonder he sits so rigidly," Lucas continued, causing me to groan and bury my face in my hands, feeling embarrassed and uncomfortable.

Vincent's head turned, giving Lucas a side-eye, to which Lucas couldn't help but wink at him in return, his tongue dipping out of his mouth to touch his metal lip piercing.

I clipped his arm, "Stop it," I whispered, feeling the weight of Vincent's gaze on me and wishing I could disappear into the floor.

Thankfully, Andrew unknowingly broke the tension between my two circle members.

“Hello, everyone,” he spoke, causing the chatter in the room to turn into a dead silence. He gave a little cough before taking a sip from his water bottle, his hands trembling.

“My name is Andrew, and I am here today to give a talk on behalf of The Sacred Circle Community,” he said, gaining more confidence as he spoke.

“And I am here also,” Mrs. Mason spoke a little too sweetly for my taste, “But I will be only observing. You won’t even notice that I am here,” she added.

“Kill me,” Julia whispered under her breath.

“I’ll join you.” I heard Kristina say from two chairs over.

“In the SCC, five is our holy number, and you may ask yourselves, why?” Andrew’s voice trembled. His finger shook as he played with the edge of his paper nervously. The growing gleam of sweat was building again, but he forced himself to carry on, his eyes darting around the room, unable to hold any of our eyes.

“Five,” He inhaled a shaky breath while wetting his lips, “is the holy number. It is the symbol of positive changes and growth. It represents the changes in your life, and that will bring the balance that our souls need.”

It was clear that he wasn’t comfortable giving speeches, making me question why he was torturing himself with this.

“We have the five senses, toes, fingers, and of course, the circle of five members altogether. It is a symbol of perfection.”

“That is why it is important to find your circle. Perfection cannot be achieved if you do not complete a full circle,” Mrs. Mason said abruptly, cutting in and making Andrew jump. All of us remembering her presence.

“We are the higher beings. Those that hold the three fives are the ones who are blessed with circle members. Other creatures in this world don’t hold the same senses we do, hence why they are not blessed with the perfection of a circle.” Mrs. Mason spoke.

Only a few looked as uneasy as I felt, while the majority ate up every word she spoke.

Andrew smiled weakly as his fingers flicked through his notes, “Yes, well.”

“What about if you’re missing a finger?” Lucas asked, interrupting with a hint of curiosity and defiance in his voice.

*No! Please, no, Lucas!* My mind screamed at him as a wave of unease washed over me through our bond. But that didn’t stop the heads from turning in our direction. My cheeks burned as I slowly sank lower into my chair.

Andrew blinked a few times before turning to Lucas, “Excuse me?”

“If you’re born without fingers, does that mean you won’t have a circle?” Lucas pressed on. I felt his amusement grow at the way Andrew was now squirming.



Andrew flushed with uncertainty as he struggled to come up with an answer. “They will still have a circle, even without a finger. They have the rest,” he responded weakly.

“What if you’re blind, deaf, missing a hand and a foot? They won’t have the rest then,” Lucas continued, his voice filled with a hint of sarcasm.

A few chuckles were heard around the room as Andrew sputtered and turned red, unable to respond. He looked down at his notes as if they might hold the answers he was searching for.

“I mean, monkeys have the five senses....” Lucas thought out loud, “They are also stronger than us. Would not recommend fighting a chimp. Maybe they are the ‘higher beings’.”

“They are creatures that don’t have a soul!” Mrs. Mason hissed, her pudgy face blazed with fury.

“What about mundane? They are like us, three fives and all, along with the rest of us.” Kristina said, her voice filled with a sense of righteousness.

“Well, erm...” Andrew was now flicking through his pile. It was a sorry sight to witness. My stomach turned to see him stumble and stutter while looking deathly pale as he was frantically searching.

“Mundane’s are soulless beings that are lost. They have not been blessed because they are not perfect. They will never

hold the souls of their circle because they are, in fact, pests.” Mrs. Mason snapped, bringing the attention back to her.

“I’m not going to sit here and listen to this hateful bullshit,” Kristina spat, getting up from her seat with a loud scrape. Every face turned towards her, some agape and others with outright glares. The anger and disgust boiling inside her was palpable as she stood tall, her fists clenched at her sides.

“This talk is mandatory! You will sit and take in this lesson, Miss Richenberg!” Mrs. Mason snapped, pointing a finger at Kristina.

We all held our breath as Kristina stared down at Mrs. Mason, her eyes burning with fierce determination. I was sure if she could have a superpower, she would wish for laser eyes and zap her out of existence. Andrew stared in bewilderment, his nerves from before forgotten as he watched in awe at Kristina’s outburst.

Students broke out in a chatter, each sending looks of shock and anger towards Kristina, but a few looked at her in admiration and hope. She chose a new path for us, and a few students followed her lead. Once the first moved, a few others found the courage to follow.

“Cheese and crackers!” Andrew exclaimed. His lost look flickered around the room as he ran a hand through his hair. He had completely lost his audience. “Okay, everyone! It is perfectly fine-”

“This is not perfectly fine!” Mrs. Mason snapped at him before turning to those leaving, “Those that leave this

classroom will get detention!” Mrs. Mason shouted, trying to regain control as students continued to flee. But her threats of detention fell on deaf ears.

“Nah, sorry, Andrew. This class isn’t for me either.” Lucas spoke, bringing Andrew to look his way as he also got up from his seat. He sent the guy his megawatt smile, trying to make amends with a gesture.

“Come on, Guppy.” Lucas grabbed my hand, pulling me up with him as we joined the others in leaving the classroom.

As we walked out of the classroom, I couldn’t help but notice the tension in the air. Hannah, Julia, Dylan, and Vincent were among the small group of students who had joined us, while most remained in class.

Lucas wore a smug grin, clearly relishing the chaos he had caused. On the other hand, Kristina was seething with anger, her eyes locked onto Lucas in a glare.

As we made our way to the cafeteria, Mrs. Mason stormed towards us, her face twisted in a furious scowl. “Every one of you is expected to report after school for detention,” she spat. “Those who do not show will be written up and risk expulsion.” Her beady eyes lingered on Lucas before settling on Kristina, her warning clear. “I’ll let you all know that your actions can easily derail your futures.”

We all glared at the woman who held our futures in her hands.

As she left, Julia sneered, “What a class ‘A’ bitch,” her words met with murmurs of agreement from the group.



“This is unbelievable.” Julia sighed, biting at her purple thumbnail. The disappointment and frustration were clear in her voice, her posture slumping in defeat.

“Isn’t there a student union we could call to help?” Hannah asked, her eyes scanning the room between us all.

“And say what? Help, the timid SCC guy is talking to us?” Lucas snorted at his own joke, but the others just rolled their eyes at him, their own feelings of defeat and acceptance evident on their faces.

To say all of us were in a tense environment was a given. We were all back where we started. None of us were happy to hear that our detention was having to attend the SCC talk again. Many grumbled under their breath, while others remained stoically silent, accepting their fate.

Kristina glared at the awkward Andrew, who was standing at the front, shuffling the leaflets he always had. You would have thought they were his shield from how he handled them.

Hannah nodded somberly, “What else can we do?”

“Walk out again?” Lucas suggested a hint of excitement in his voice at the thought of causing more chaos.

Julia snorted, “We would be here again if we did.”

“They can’t do this to us.” Kristina hissed, still staring daggers at Andrew, who sensed the sharp points of her gaze. He was very much focused on the flyers in his hands, but his eyes were unmoving, clearly not reading the words of his notes. He seemed to shrink under Kristina’s intense stare, looking increasingly uncomfortable as the minutes passed.

Lucas frowned at our little group before his eyes went to the other remaining people, “Where is Dylan?”

It was then my turn to look around the class to notice that no Dylan was in sight. I hadn’t seen him since I’d quickly separated from our little group to make a quick phone call to Da, saying I wouldn’t be home in time for dinner due to my first-ever detention.

To say Da was very pleased with my rebellion would be an understatement.

“He’s got practice.” Vincent’s voice answered curtly from behind us.

“Lucky son of a bitch.” Lucas murmured. “To think playing an instrument would get him out of this. Anyone could do it easily.”

Vincent gave a short chuckle, his eyes filled with a hint of sarcasm, “Your special ass wouldn’t be able to strum a chord. I’ve also heard you sing. A goose call has more melody than yours.”

A burst of giggles came up my throat at Vincent’s comment while Lucas gave a huge gasp, his face contorting with a mock

offense, “You think my ass is special?”

“Maybe we should just sit this through? I mean, we don’t have to listen and take in what they say.” Hannah spoke, her voice filled with a sense of resignation as she tried to calm the anger that was buzzing around the room.

Kristina’s face twisted with frustration, “We should have a choice to be here or not. I don’t want to hear that my brother is wrong just for being alive, that he is a mistake, a burden to our society. He is my brother, and everyone in my family loves him. He is perfect just the way he is.”

A few others around the room nodded in agreement, listening to our conversation. Kristina was one of many who had a mundane family member here.

Mrs. Mason’s return was met with tension as her waddled walk came to a stop next to Andrew. Her expression hardened as she gave us a stern look, but it softened significantly when her gaze fell on Vincent.

“Oh, Vincent. You don’t have to be here,” she said, her tone almost sympathetic.

Vincent’s voice was calm but tinged with anger as he replied, “You said anyone who didn’t show could have their future changed.”

Mrs. Mason let out a forced chuckle, “You’re an asset here, Vincent. Your future is solid, and I’m sure you have other important things to be doing in your spare time.”

Next to me, Lucas gave a soft retching sound, his finger in his mouth as he gagged.

“Unlike some people,” Mrs. Mason snapped, glaring at Lucas before softening again when she turned back to Vincent. “You can go, dear.”

“Fucking, teacher’s pet!” Lucas hissed as Vincent got up from his desk, with Julia and Hannah beside me joining in with the hiss.

“I’m sure you can handle this, Andrew.” Mrs. Mason said, giving him her sickly-sweet smile. She most definitely saw his scared look but chose to ignore it.

“O-of course!” Andrew even tried to smile, but the strain of it looked painful, the nervousness and fear etched clearly on his face.

“If you have any problems, you know how to reach me.” She hummed before blissfully walking out, not even noticing the scowls and disdain she was receiving from the students.

A cough brought us back to the front of the room to see Andrew giving a timid, forced smile.

“Hello, everyone. My name is Andrew, and I am here today to give a talk on behalf of The Sacred Circle Community.”

Julia sent me an alarmed look before saying, “He isn’t doing this all again, is he?” in a whispered hiss.

“Shit.” Lucas groaned, palming his face in exasperation while Andrew spoke word by word what he had already said last time.

The longer neither of us spoke, the more confidence Andrew got, his voice growing louder and more animated. He became surer of his information and belief, but as he relaxed, the more I noticed Kristina fidgeting. I watched her fists clenched tightly, along with her jaw jumping, her anger and irritation evident. It didn't take a genius to know it wouldn't take much for her to explode, the tension in the room rising with each passing moment.

“I would like you all to have these flyers to take home with you.” He said, placing them in front of each person, his voice laced with a hint of uncertainty. “They might have more information than I have discussed today.”

As he approached Kristina, his pace slowed, and a visible wave of hesitation washed over him. His throat bobbed nervously as he swallowed, and his shoes shuffled anxiously against the carpet, a clear indication that he wanted to say something.

He leaned forward towards her, still looking a bit uncomfortable.

“I'm sorry if you didn't like my talk,” he said softly, his voice trembling slightly. “But I will be here for the rest of the year to help if you need it.” He said, slowly pushing the flyers toward her.

But it was the final straw for Kristina.

“Take your stupid hate-spreading flyers!” She shouted, her voice filled with anger and frustration as she pushed the leaflets back at Andrew's chest.



He swayed backward under her force but quickly grabbed her hand to stop himself from toppling over.

The class watched in stunned silence as the two locked eyes in a tense standoff. Kristina's anger intensified, her face shifting into a hardened scowl as she spat out her next words.

"You disgust me," she spat out, her words filled with a scorching truth that sent a chill down the spine of those around her. My stomach turned with pain to see my friend unleash her wrath while Andrew, his face pale and eyes wide, looked crushed by her words.

The class watched silently as Kristina stormed out, slamming the door behind her. Andrew's shoulders curled inwards as he clutched his chest. The class was eerily quiet as we wondered what he would do next. But it was Lucas who eventually stepped forward to break the silence.

"Okay, I guess our detention has now been canceled after that fiasco." The students rushed out of the classroom, leaving Andrew standing there with a look of frozen bewilderment on his face.

"Shit, he looks like he's going to faint... or throw up. But, god, I hope not at the same time." Lucas muttered with a grimace and actually looked a little concerned for him.

Ignoring Lucas's chatter, I pulled at his shirt, needing his full attention on me for a moment. When his ocean-blue eyes met mine, I gestured my head towards Andrew.

“Can you do something for him? I don’t think he’s...” I trailed off, unsure of how to finish my sentence. I didn’t think he was as bad as people made him out to be, but his beliefs were a tough pill to swallow.

“I don’t think I’m the right person for him, Guppy,” Lucas said, hesitancy clear in his voice.

“Please?” I begged, not wanting to leave Andrew like this but also wanting to check on Kristina.

“Fine, I can do that.” He said, easily giving in, “Poor sap looks lost.”

“Thank you,” I said, smiling gratefully. “I’m going to check on Kristina. Today has been hard on her.”

Lucas’ body stilled, “Perhaps she wants to be alone right now.”

I frowned, “She obviously needs a friend.”

“A friend who hasn’t been much of a friend to you the last week?” He snapped back at me, anger and guilt clear in his voice.

I glared at Lucas, scoffing at his ridiculousness. Despite Lucas’s protests, my determination to be there for Kristina was stronger than ever. I refused to be easily thrown off by his words when our friend was obviously going through something difficult. Kristina was among the first people I had made friends with, and I wasn’t ready to throw that away.

“She is clearly going through something, Lucas, and I’m going to see if she is okay,” I said, pulling away from this

conversation.

“Grace, wait.” He said, grabbing a hold of my sleeve, desperation creeping into his voice.

Giving him a confused look, I watched Lucas deflate, his shoulders slumping in defeat.

“Fuck, I didn’t want it to come out like this.” His hands were stuffed in his blond hair, pulling the strands tightly while I suffered the echo of pain in his chest.

“Tell me what?” I asked, my voice trembling with a mix of confusion and dread.

“Fuck,” Lucas breathed, rubbing at his face as a bright redness spread across his cheeks from the rough friction. “You know how Kristina has been...off?”

I nodded, my stomach churning with a pit of unease.

“She’s been avoiding you, Grace. She’s been avoiding you because of me- we...”

“You slept with her,” I breathed, the words barely audible as they slipped from my lips.

Lucas nodded, his eyes crumpled with sorrow, “It was years ago. We were completely drunk- a stupid mistake.”

“I don’t understand,” I voiced through the white noise erupting in my mind. I was surprised I could still hear his words.

*You do understand,* my mind whispered somberly.

“You thought it was a great idea to tell me now? At school?” I asked, anger and betrayal coursing through my veins.

I felt like I was going to be sick. All I could think was why now, why here, why at all. I couldn't shake the feeling of betrayal and anger.

“Is there anyone else? Perhaps Julia? Or maybe even Hannah?” I asked with rage.

But my anger took a hit when the look of pain flashed from his face.

“No. They are like what I think annoying sisters are like.”

*But Kristina obviously wasn't like a sister to him.*

I didn't know how to react. My emotions were jumbled, and I couldn't decide whether to be sad, angry or just act like nothing had happened.

“I can't deal with you right now, Lucas,” I said, my voice cold and distant as I pushed past him, my anger burning within me.

“Grace!” Lucas's voice was tinged with panic as he called out to me, but I ignored it. My determination to find Kristina outweighed my concern for him.

I approached Julia, who was lingering in the corridor, “Do you know where Kristina could have gone?” I asked, my voice laced with worry.

“No, Hannah is canceling our appointment with the local loon so we can help with Kristina.” Julia replied, gesturing to Hannah, who was speaking rapidly on her phone.

I shook my head, “Don’t, I will go find her, and I’ll keep you posted.”

“Are you sure?” Julia looked skeptical.

I nodded. I felt Kristina and I needed a moment alone after what I had just learned. “Go, I’m going to check on her,” I said, heading towards the music side of the school. Perhaps she went to get Dylan as they normally went home together.

I quickly walked through the school, checking classrooms and peeking through windows, but I couldn’t find any sign of her. My heart was pounding in my chest as I entered the bathroom.

A snuffle caught my attention, and I called out, “Kristina?”

The stall door creaked open, revealing a sad and tear-streaked Kristina. Her eyes were swollen, and her freckled cheeks were damp with tears. My heart ached as I watched her roughly swipe at her tears in anger.

“I would ask if you are okay, but I know today was rough,” I said softly, understanding that Kristina had been struggling. She thrived on helping others, but I knew it was hard for her to ask for help in return.

She shook her head, causing her wild orange hair to fall over half of her face, shielding her from my gaze. But even

through the curtain of hair, I could see how her lips trembled as she tried to compose herself.

“Everything is so fucking messed up,” she whispered, her voice heavy with grief and hopelessness. It was like a dark veil had been draped over her once lively melody, turning it into a flat, dull note.

“Messed up is okay,” I said, trying to calm my voice. I remembered the words my father had once consoled me with when I was younger and panicking. “Messed up means it can be reorganized, reshaped to what you want it to be.”

Kristina looked at me for a moment, her eyes wide and unblinking. But then she shook her head again, more firmly this time. “No, Grace, I don’t think it can.”

With the new knowledge of what Lucas had told me, it was blatantly clear what Kristina was going through. Guilt was a slow killer, draining the life from her. And as I looked at my friend, I felt a surge of anger, not directed at her, but at myself.

I was angry at myself for feeling sad about the situation.

I desperately wanted to let go of my jealousy, not to be one of those who felt cheated because my circle members weren’t thinking about me before we met. But as I looked at Kristina’s tear-streaked face, I saw the unfairness of my emotions. I hadn’t wanted to find my circle in the first place, and yet I expected them to think of me.

*I was a selfish hypocrite.*

But I couldn't just turn off my feelings. I had to change them and adapt to another way of thinking.

"It can." I asserted. I shakily grabbed her shoulders, hoping my will could give her confidence. My friend needed help, and I would step up for her.

"I can't hold it together anymore." She sobbed, putting her head into her hands.

"You shouldn't have to, Kristina. What they're saying about Mundane is just horrible." My words didn't help as another moan came from her, followed by a loud sob.

Kristina shook her head, "No, Grace. This isn't about that."

"If this is about you and Lucas, I already know."

"You know? Oh god, I'm so sorry!" It was now her turn to grab me. I tried not to flinch at the contact or how her nails dug into my arms while she clung to me. I felt the weight of her body, wanting to slump as her spine tried to curl in on itself while another sob came from her.

Her face was blotchy and swollen as tears ran free down her face. I could hear her lungs pant, begging for proper breath.

"Breathe," I ordered, palming her wet, puffy cheeks. Just witnessing her breaking down like this ached my own heart. It was like I was the one unable to breathe.

"I'm so sorry, Grace!" She sobbed again. Her head fell forward, making me stumble backward before I braced myself to hold more of her weight. "I'm the worst friend!"

“Kristina, this isn’t worth getting yourself worked up like this,” I spoke, trying to calm her down after more words came from her that didn’t sound like words. Instead, they were a gargled mess while her body tried to breathe.

“It’s been killing me.” She wiped her cheek angrily, making her already red cheeks darker. “As soon as you found out Apollo was part of your circle, I’ve been trying to get us both to tell you. But he said you’ve been too exhausted and had a lot going on. That it wasn’t a good time.”

“It has...”

“I’m sorry if I’m being selfish by telling you, but I couldn’t hold it any longer.”

“No, we all needed it out in the open.” Even though I longed to have never been told. Obliviousness was a gift.

Kristina wiped her eyes with the tissue I gave her, “I never thought I would experience this. I didn’t think back then. It was a drunken fling.”

“How long ago?” I regretted the question before it fully left my mouth. But my curiosity was much greater.

“Like a year and a half ago. Apollo was still recovering from his leg-”

“You know about his leg?”

“Yeah, he was in the hospital for a while. I guess he wasn’t the same when he came out, a bit more withdrawn.” She gave a shrug before wiping her eyes with a tissue, “But he still partied a lot, I would say much harder than now, and that’s



saying something. But he wasn't what he used to be like. We grew up together, same town, same school. I never saw him like that. It makes me ill just thinking about that night. We were both sad, drunk, and sad, and Vincent came along. I can't really remember much after that. They argued, I think." Kristina shook her head, "But I promise, Grace, it meant nothing."

The realization hit me like a ton of bricks, bringing a coldness, expanding wildly. My breath caught in my throat.

"Vincent?" I weakly spoke, my voice barely above a whisper.

Kristina slowly nodded, "We were all super drunk. We all regretted it afterward." Kristina winced, as if the memory of it hurt her, "I think that's why Apollo and Vincent fight a lot now."

Lucas never mentioned that Vincent was involved.

"God, I never thought I would tell one of my friends I slept with one of their circle members. It makes me feel sick." Kristina cringed, shaking her head in disgust. She was completely unaware that I was having my own breakdown now.

"Two," my voice sounded so far away.

*Did I even speak?*

Kristina paled, and her voice sounded breathless, "Two?"

*I guess I did,* I thought with a nod.

“Vincent is also part of my circle,” I explained nervously.

Her eyes glazed over with shock, her mouth open, but before I could say anything, she ran into one of the toilet stalls. Her retching was loud, and with how I felt, I was close to throwing up beside her.

That would have been a great bonding moment between friends.

“Grace, I’m so sorry,” Kristina said from the floor once her stomach settled. Her arm hung over the toilet bowl rim while the rest of her body slumped with exhaustion.

She looked utterly defeated as I stood there, unsure of what to do or say.

“I would understand if you’re mad at me.” Kristina winced as she stared at the bathroom floor, her voice filled with guilt and shame.

“I’m not mad. I mean, I think anyone would feel a bit disheartened. I’m just shocked and upset at it being so abrupt.” I replied, trying to process the flood of overwhelming emotions.

“And... you said Vincent is...” Kristina’s voice was filled with uncertainty and confusion.

I nodded, feeling slightly guilty at telling her, but the relief of revealing what Vincent was to me was also a good feeling. The pressure of the secret I had been holding now released like a flower blooming.

“I didn’t know. No one told me. Am I that bad of a friend?” Kristina’s voice was tinged with desperation and self-doubt.

I shook my head as I sat down opposite her in this tiny stall, “No one knows. I didn’t even know for a while.”

Kristina sent me a confused look, which was the last pull I needed to spill everything that had happened in the previous week. I told her everything, Lucas’s plan to get me to know about Vincent. Vincent revealing himself and making me keep it all one big secret.

I unleashed it all to a wide-eyed Kristina, and the lightness I felt afterward was an addictive lift.

“Jesus,” Kristina whispered, her body sagging with exhaustion as we both sat slumped on the bathroom floor, our bodies cramped and twisted around the toilet in the tight cubicle.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that, Grace.” Kristina’s voice was filled with empathy and remorse as she reached out to touch my arm in a comforting gesture.

“It’s been a lot,” I replied, my voice barely above a whisper as I struggled to come to terms with everything that had been revealed. My mind was reeling, overwhelmed by the weight of my conflicting emotions.

“Then Apollo was right. You didn’t need this in your life right now.” Kristina’s words were laced with guilt and regret.

“No, like I said. It needed to be said. But I’m not going to lie. It does hurt. When you told me about Lucas’s history a few

weeks ago, I never thought... I mean, I knew if I looked a few people in the eye, they might have been with him." I shook my head, trying to push the jealousy away. "It's naïve of me to think my circle members would wait for me. But it still doesn't stop the hurt."

The thought of Lucas and Vincent knowing they were part of a circle and still doing things with other people, and for it to be not just anyone but my friend, left a bitter taste in my mouth.

*They didn't know you then,* my mind reminded me, but it wasn't enough to rid the sour taste in my mouth.

What else could I do? Yet again, I couldn't change the past, especially one where I wasn't even present.

The more I thought about it, the more sure I became that I wasn't angry at them, just at myself for feeling jealous. I wanted to be better than my mother's clients. I wanted to be better, period.

"I'm so confused right now. I can't believe that Vincent is part of your circle." Kristina palmed, her head looking paler than she did before. "I'm so stupid for not seeing it. They must drive you crazy."

"They're assholes," I said, letting out a tired chuckle. "I haven't really experienced seeing them being nice together."

The memory of them together in the toilet closest hit me like a truck. I could remember the moans and sounds they made. I felt my body instantly heat up.

Kristina let out a laugh, “You have gone completely red. You’ve seen something by that look.”

I groaned, banging the back of my head against the stall wall. “I know all circle members have their relationships, whether romantic or otherwise, but with them, I cannot place them in either. They have their own category.”

“They were quite romantic when they were together with me.”

It was one thing being told, but it went to another level hearing the details. Her words turned my stomach, but I forced myself to listen.

Kristina winced at my expression, her remorse clear in her voice, “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” I replied, my voice tight with emotion.

“If you hate me, I understand.” She spoke tenderly, breaking the silence.

“We are okay, Kristina. I don’t hate you, and I’m not mad at you.” If I had to say it every day for her to feel better, I would.

“You have the right to be, though. I deserve it,” she added, with a hint of guilt.

“What good would it do? Besides, I think you have suffered from these past weeks and today.” I replied.

“We can’t get lower than this.” She gestured to us, sitting on the restroom floor with a toilet between us. “We would only

need a vodka bottle, and our picture of utter humiliation would be complete.”

“I’m sure Julia would have some hidden in her dorm room,” I said, bringing a tired laugh from both of us.

Kristina tried her best not to smile, but the snort that came from her broke her restraint, making me smile in return. “It’s so odd to see this side of you. I love it. It’s just a shame we can’t pick and choose who we’re to be with.”

“If only,” I said bitterly, my voice tinged with sadness.

But it was brought with a wave of guilt. To say I didn’t want them was untrue. I needed them. I just wished I could say the magic words to make everything perfect.

*Was it that hard to do?*

“Whoever is picking circle members is an asshole who is shit at their job,” Kristina said softly. Her eyes glazed over as she stared at the stall wall, off in thought.

We were quiet for a while. Just the two of us taking in the still environment while the tornado of our emotions calmed.

“My head is killing me. I’m so tired.” Kristina whined, softly knocking her head against the wall to rest it.

“You need to go home and rest. I think we both do.” My whole body felt drained. I was still experiencing some exhaustion from finding Vincent.

“Will you be okay?” Kristina asked as we made our way out of the bathroom, waiting for Dylan.

Kristina's voice was filled with genuine concern as she looked at me with tired eyes. Despite her emotional turmoil and exhaustion, she still thought of me.

"I'll be fine," I replied with a sigh, "but Lucas might be another story." Kristina gave a small, exhausted laugh in response.

Dylan quickly came to Kristina's aid, offering her his arm for support as she struggled to keep her eyes open. The weight of the day's events had taken its toll on her as it had on me.

But before I could go home and seek solace in sleep, there was one more thing I had to do.

I had to talk to Lucas.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### LUCAS

Okay, I like to remind people that I am many things. A flirt, a party animal, an idiot, a miracle worker, and as of right now, a fucking coward. I knew what I had to do as soon as Grace started following Kristina. I was just kicking myself at how I had multiple chances to tell her sooner, to come clean and be honest. But in my fucked-up mind, I couldn't bring myself to do it.

And because of my lack of courage, I now suffered from the invisible knife that twisted in my chest, which was only an echo of what Grace was currently feeling, and it was all because of me.

It burned like ice, chilling my center while the deep pit of dread in my stomach expanded. Grace's emotions were consuming me from within, and I didn't know which emotions were my own or hers at this point. But it didn't matter. We were one, a connection of pain, anger, and betrayal. The guilt was suffocating, making it hard to breathe, and I couldn't shake the feeling of impending doom.



I would stand a thousand needles piercing my skin if it meant she'd stay with me.

"I don't understand what I did wrong." Andrew whispered, bringing me back to reality with a few blinks.

Andrew stood there, looking down at the leaflets like they held the answer. Maybe for him, they could, but I knew for a fact that those inanimate objects wouldn't be helping me.

"I read all the teachings and followed all the rules." He continued to mutter, not knowing I was having my own self-questioning moment inside my head.

I was the worst person for him to ask these questions.

I didn't know why Grace thought I was the person for this. I didn't have the patience or drive to force myself to care, especially for someone who would most likely cast me out because of who I am. Though I felt like Andrew was just a naïve guy who followed his community's rules without a second thought.

I pulled my big boy pants up and forced myself to swallow down my increasing panic at the thought of Grace and Kristina being alone.

*They were probably talking about me right now, about what an asshole I am.*

I really had made a mess of things.

"I don't understand why I got this kind of reaction," Andrew said, his eyes lifting to meet mine in confusion.

“Because not everyone likes what you’re preaching.” I said simply, leaning my hip on the desk, feigning a relaxed posture. My whole body was tense, and I was holding in the urge to run by a thread.

I really wanted to go find them, to make things right.

“But why? It’s the truth of an order that we all should follow.” Andrew frowned, not really understanding where I was coming from.

Ahh, blind faith.

I would have been on the line of sympathy and envy for him, but at this point, I couldn’t care less. Not when my own soulmate could turn her back on me at any moment. The thought of losing her made my heart ache, and my chest feel heavy.

So instead of running away, I sucked in a breath and tried to stick to this conversation.

“Is it?”

“What?” Andrew’s frown deepened with bewilderment. “Of course it is.”

It was a clear sign that he’d never been exposed to questioning his faith.

Again, I questioned why Grace thought I was the best person for him right now.

“Well, not everyone wants to follow those rules.” I snapped, my voice filled with frustration and anger. “You come here

judging people and their lives just because your community says so? It's not right." I shook my head, trying to contain my escalating emotions.

It wasn't this guy's fault. The whole community was wrapped up in chains, and he was blind to see it.

"We're just trying to help people." He whispered, his voice filled with certainty. He really believed in it.

"And saying that Mundane's are a burden and all that crap? That isn't helping. That's discrimination."

Andrew's mouth went agape, "She... She has a Mundane brother?"

I gave a curt nod, feeling a slight sympathy for the guy. He obviously hadn't been exposed to much, and it did seem like he was just a pawn for his community and the school. Anyone could see he was way out of his depth here. It really made me want to shake him, to show him the world outside of the stifling life he must live. Just watching him was suffocating enough.

"You haven't been out much, have you?"

Andrew gave me a small frown, "I've had my family, my community."

"But this is the first time you're out in the big wide world alone, right?"

"I've been to the city."

"Alone? Without anyone else?"

“I-I-I...,” He looked so puzzled, stuttering and stumbling till he forced himself to clear his throat with a cough. “The SCC is a community-based society. No one would ever be lonely. We are a family.” He spoke like he was reading off a script. Perhaps it was. I had no doubt that he had other statements drilled into him.

I wasn't the one to judge people's families. My own was a mess, and to think Andrew may have more of an immersive family than me was a kick in the gut.

It was then a lightbulb of an idea went off in my head.

“You know,” I said slowly, unable to stop the smile from growing on my lips. “What you need is to form a connection with others.”

“Connection?” He asked with uncertainty but his eyes wide with curiosity.

“Like another perspective.” I explained, my mind racing with possibilities. “A new way of thinking.”

“But... I don't understand what you're getting at here.” Andrew said, his voice laced with insecurity.

“If you ever want to reach beyond your boundaries. I am your guy.” I said confidently, my heart beating with excitement. I could show him the world, the side of life he had never experienced before.

Andrew's face flushed to a bright scarlet, “I'm dedicated to my circle. I won't stray from them.”

“Wait, no!” I exclaimed, realizing he had misunderstood my intentions. “That isn’t what I meant! You’re cute and all, in that awkward way you have going on, but it’s my circle for me. No one else.”

“That is good to hear. I’d heard... stories.”

“You shouldn’t believe what people say!” I snapped.

So what if this meek guy said he heard shit about me?

“Oh, right.” I could see the confusion and uncertainty in Andrew’s eyes.

“I don’t give a shit.” I said, hoping saying it out loud would make it true. So what if he believes what everyone else does. I didn’t care. Not one bit. “Just know if you want to break free of all those rules, I’m your guy.”

I couldn’t help but feel excited about the possibility of ruffling this preppy boy up.

There, I did my charitable contribution for the month. Now my karma score should go right up. All I needed now was a gold star sticker saying how much of a good boy I was.

But as I looked up and noticed Grace at the classroom entrance, her expression one of exhaustion, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of guilt wash over me.

*Fuck!*

“Look, Andrew, I got to go.” I wanted to get out of this conversation, my mind already focusing on the turmoil brewing within Grace.

“Oh, yeah, right. Okay, I’m getting a bit tired anyway.” Andrew muttered, rubbing his eyes softly before looking dejected at the desk. “I will think about your offer.”

“Cool, glad to have this chat.” I said, but my mind was already elsewhere. My main focus was on the expression on Grace’s face as she stood there, watching me.

The sensation coming off her felt like her insides were a deflated limp balloon. The exhaustion of today was piling on, and it made me want to sleep forever.

“Grace,” I spoke, coming up towards her, but she had her head turned down the hall where Dylan came up, holding Kristina in his arms.

I couldn’t help but cringe at her appearance.

Her head tucked right against Dylan’s throat made it nearly impossible to see her, especially with her frizzled red hair covering most of her face. But I caught a glimpse of puffy redness around her eyes. I would have thought she was dead by the way her body looked dull from exhaustion. But the soft snores that came from her put me at ease.

Not enough to settle my other whirlwind of emotions, anger, guilt, and self-loathing. I knew that I was part of the reason for Kristina’s current state, and it made my head start to ache with the weight of my actions.

Kristina had come to me for help multiple times before, and I’d always tried to help her. Our friendship was a long one. We practically grew up together. But my inability to handle

relationships drove her away, leaving me with nothing but resentment.

Her mother-like nature drove me away like a dog with its tail between its legs.

It was better for me to hop around friendships. Seeking out people like me who had their own messed-up families or those who just didn't care about anyone else.

It made me feel normal.

But I wasn't normal.

Seeing Kristina, exhausted and asleep in her cousin's arms, while I watched my circle member give Dylan a soft, reassuring smile as they passed by, ignited a fuse within me.

I had messed up, while Dylan - the perfect, put-together, music-loving dick - was the comforter once again. He probably could flash his dimpled smile showing his perfect teeth, and the world would have peace. Did he shit rainbows and goodwill as well?

I hated him...

Okay, not really. I didn't hate him, but I hated how perfect he was.

Grace sighed beside me, "Lucas," she said, making me turn to face her, only to see pity in her eyes.

*Well, fuck that.*

I cut her off with a forced laugh. "I don't understand why everyone is making this out to be such a big deal. I mean,

come on! It was in the past. We are it now, and nothing else matters.” Self-hate bubbled within me, but I couldn’t stop the words from spilling out.

I needed her fire, not this dull exhaustion that felt like defeat. It was better to be angry. Anger meant you cared to a certain point.

Grace came alight at that moment, and like the broken fuck I was. I became ecstatic.

“It matters when you dump that bomb on me randomly, Lucas!” she hissed like steam, her eyes ignited with fury.

*More.*

“I asked you before we went to your house weeks ago. Do you remember?” she asked. Her words were like daggers. I could feel its point at my jugular. My heart was pounding in my chest as I felt the weight of her disappointment and anger bearing down on me.

I nodded, staying silent as I knew where she was heading. She had come across Kristina and me arguing about when to tell Grace. I’d tried to bury it then, but Kristina wasn’t having any of it.

“Do you remember what you said?” Her words were accusatory, each one a sharp prod to my chest.

I knew this tactic. Everyone around me had used it at some point. Throwing my own words back at me, using them as evidence to prove their point, to fuel their anger and



disappointment. I would be the knife that twists in my own gut.

“I said one day soon I would tell you.” I believed I would have eventually. I just needed the perfect time, and I would have sat down with her and said my piece. But now, standing here in front of her, I couldn’t help but regret not telling her sooner.

“Soon.” Her tone was filled with disgust. “And instead of telling me privately, you choose to blurt it out at the last second. You only told me because you knew Kristina was about to crack.”

“I was only trying to help.” My voice sounded weak.

“Help? Help yourself, you mean.” She laughed with a shake of her head. I loved making my Grace laugh, the way it gave an airy jingle that was full of life, but I didn’t like this one. This laugh was hollow and damp. A completely lackluster laugh that she forced me to listen to.

*My fault.*

“Did you see our friend just now? Did that look helpful to you? Do you feel me, Lucas? Do I feel thankful for your help?” she asked, her words piercing me like sharp knives.

“You have had a rough couple of weeks, Grace.” I reasoned. A desperate emotion had its talons in my chest, “Did you really want more to be piled on? You were close to having a breakdown on your first day back!”

Grace's anger spiked, her head recoiling back. "Are you blaming me for this?"

"What? No!" I exclaimed, my own frustration and fear starting to bubble to the surface. "I didn't want to see you break, Grace."

The truth was, I couldn't bear the thought of losing her. I wanted to tell her, but the promise I gave to her trapped me. Either way, if I told her sooner or not, it was going to hurt her.

"Break me?" Her voice went high, but she didn't question it further. "You really don't trust me, do you?"

"What? Of course, I do! You're part of my circle, Grace. You're a part of my soul."

*'Beau, please trust us. Give us time to heal. We will be better.'* I heard my dad, Simon's, voice when I was seven. I'd been sneaking into the hall that night, overhearing my dad's argument in the kitchen.

"Grace-" I started, but before I could say anything more, she stopped me with her hand up, creating distance already.

"You have no trust in me." Her voice broke as her sadness clouded my chest, bringing a sense of hopelessness.

I shook my head frantically, silently begging her to see that it wasn't true. I could only allow her emotions to wash through me, but I had to make her see.

*I have to fix this!*

I could still hear my fathers' words the night their circle completely broke. It haunted me, each word they said laying the foundation for who I was today.

It was the same conversation Grace was having with me, and I couldn't stop my mind from returning to the memory.

*'I can't live like this, Simon! I can't trust either of you to get better, and I can't be with you both while that thing is here!'*

*'That thing is your son, Beau!'*

*'I can't do this. I can't live in this suffocation any longer. I'm taking Liam, and we are leaving this hell.'*

*'We are still a circle, Beau! You can't just leave us'* The voice of my own dad was heard from my bedroom. I remembered their screams and fights that made the walls vibrate. The slamming of doors and cries came from my older brother and sister.

*'Watch me!'*

*'Daddy, no! Don't leave us! I'm sorry!'* I called out, trying to follow both him and my brother. If they stopped walking, I could talk to them. Say how sorry I was and that I would fix everything. They didn't have to go!

I could feel my voice wrapping around me, smothering me with my cries.

"Why? So, you would leave me!" I shouted in a fury, my own anger rising. I looked at the widening brown eyes of my father's turn back to Grace's. Her mouth wide agape as she witnessed me breaking even more.

“What?” Her surprised expression didn’t stop the fear from rising in my chest. My mind was clouded with fog, and I couldn’t think clearly.

“I bet you were waiting for this moment,” I spat out, feeling like I was drowning in my own mistakes. “Waiting for me to mess up again so you could finally leave me.”

I felt suffocated, overwhelmed by the voices from my past that haunted me.

“Lucas, I’m not going to leave you,” Grace spoke slowly, but I could still feel the anger in her voice. It was like a sharp pain in my chest, a wound I had inflicted on myself. I couldn’t blame her for wanting to leave me. It was only natural for anyone to want to run from this kind of pain.

“But what you did hurts more than anything else. It’s painful that you don’t trust me.”

*Pain that I had caused.*

*‘It is your fault that daddy left us! He left his family, his circle, because of you!’* Laura’s voice cut through.

The years of abuse were surfacing.

“And there is no reason to bring it up. I get it. I’ve messed up again. It’s what I do. What I’m good at!” I hissed through the searing pain from the memory.

*‘I will never forgive you!’* Laura’s voice echoed in my mind, her fingers digging into my wrist as her eyes blazed with a fury I had never seen before.

But my younger self never thought a circle could leave each other. All the stories of circles living happily ever after, that was what was supposed to happen. It was wrong, strange, and unheard of. Our daddies were meant to stay together. Mummy was meant to be alive. That's what all the books said!

*'I'll fix it. I promise!'* I had sounded so sure back then. But my younger self didn't know that I wasn't a fixer.

*'You mess everything up! You ruined everything!'*

I was a ruiner.

Looking at Grace now. Seeing her frustration and anger all spilling out to a few tears running down her face was more than I could handle. Her auburn hair was messy and knotted with kinks, indicating her dragging her hands through the strands out of stress and unease. Her green eyes, reddened and puffy, still held my own with a look of determination, but I could feel the betrayal I had caused.

My chest cracked as I realized that no matter what I did, I would only continue to devastate her.

“So just say it, Grace. You never wanted me. I am your greatest disappointment.”

“Lucas-”

“Say it,” I ordered, “We both know the truth. I can feel it.”

Grace's green eyes brimmed with water, and with each snuffle, I wanted to break something, but I had placed her there. I had made her cry, my own circle member, the one thing I was meant to cherish.

“Admit it, Grace!” I shouted, the school corridor echoing my voice, “Admit that after we found each other, you were disappointed.”

“I didn’t want you.” Her voice was a whisper, but it felt like a shattering blow to my chest. Confirmation would be the killer, and this was the death of everything I had ever hoped for. It was as if my entire soul had left my body at that moment. I felt the blood draining from my head, sending a loud buzzing to my ears. The plain sentence held enough of her pain to become my own. It hurt like invisible stinging cuts, bleeding out from within.

“Lucas?” Her voice was faint, but it held a hint of question.

But I didn’t answer her. I couldn’t bear to see the pitiful look on her face. I didn’t want to see the truth of her words. I didn’t need to. I had felt it since the beginning, and the hard truth of reality was still too much to bear.

She didn’t want me. I had shattered the one thing that was meant to love me. I was too broken for her. But fate had mockingly paired us together, only for me to ruin it all.

My worst fear had become my reality.

I could only walk away before I did any more damage.

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“I don’t have time for this, Lucas.” Vincent’s tone was sharp and cutting, causing me to grip my phone tighter.

Not even a hey or a how’s it going. Nope, Vincent was a straight-to-the-point type of guy. Would he say something

different if he had just opened our connection and felt my panic?

*He doesn't care.*

“I messed up,” I muttered, my words feeling hollow as I trudged down the darkening street. I had walked the entire way from school, but the exercise did nothing to ease my anger.

Dusk was settling now. The sky was a brilliant blaze of pink and red. The streetlights and the occasional headlights of passing cars cast an orange tint around me.

“I’m sure whatever it is, you can work your charm. You always do,” Vincent replied, his tone bitter. He had always been slightly envious of my charismatic attitude, but his mind worked differently. He was a sharp point, while I could bend. But lately, I’ve been close to snapping.

Since Grace, everything has changed. I had lost my touch and become more rigid as she tilted my world on its axis.

“I told Grace about Kristina,” I gritted out.

The line went silent for a moment.

I knew I had shocked him. He hadn’t seen this coming, and I would bet it really pissed him off. I could almost hear the gears in his mind turning as he processed the information.

But Vincent didn’t miss a beat, taking control of the conversation. “I’m assuming she reacted badly to that. But I’m sure she’ll realize it meant nothing. Once she calms down, we can all move on.”

The certainty in his voice made me cringe, pulling my phone away from my ear. He didn't know the extent of my screw-up. Swallowing hard, I placed the phone back to my ear and tried again.

"Well, it's actually *how* I told her," I admitted, bracing myself for his reaction.

"What do you mean?" Vincent's voice was cold. I could hear his anger rising, but he was trying to push it down.

"I..." I trailed off, my heart pounding so hard I could feel it in my ears as I tried to explain the jumbled thoughts racing through my mind. "I told her after detention, like a last-minute thing before Kristina could beat me to it."

"You told her to save your own skin," Vincent sneered.

"I was waiting for the perfect moment, but Kristina was threatening to tell her first. I panicked, Vincent," I exclaimed, my voice shaking with desperation.

"Why is it that you always do the opposite of what I expect? I told you to keep our secret, and you go and form a plan to tell her. You never think about anyone but yourself," Vincent spat.

I clenched my jaw, trying to hold back my own fury. "It wasn't like that. I know I messed up, but I didn't want this to happen."

"Then stop being an idiot," Vincent growled.

"I'm trying, I really am," I said through gritted teeth, feeling like a trapped animal. "We had a fight. I got in my head



again.”

“I swear to God, Lucas, if you tell me you lost your temper with her, I will put you on the ground,” Vincent warned, well aware of my explosive temper.

“I...I held it in, but I forced her to admit she didn’t want me,” I admitted, my voice barely above a whisper, my head hanging low in shame.

Vincent grunted. His look of obvious disgust was filled with disappointment.

“Vinny, please,” I pleaded, my voice trembling with uncertainty.

“What do you want me to do? I can’t keep bailing you out whenever you do something ridiculous!” Vincent yelled. If he was in front of me now, he would be throwing his hands up in frustration.

I stayed silent, my mind racing as I tried to come up with a solution to my problem. I knew it wasn’t Grace’s fault - it was my own fucked-up mind that was the real issue. I knew it, Vincent knew it, and probably half the town knew it too.

Everyone said that you would change for the better when you found your soulmate.

But I wasn’t different - I was still me, still broken.

*Why wasn’t I fixed?*

People said it was like an awakening when you found your soulmate and I had found two. I was supposed to be one of the

lucky ones, but here I was, still struggling to wake up to a better future.

“I’m hanging up,” Vincent said, his voice cold and unsympathetic to my lack of response. “I have another run to do, and it’s near impossible with Jaxson watching.” He spat Jaxson’s name out with a hiss.

The thought of Vincent being around Jaxson made my stomach churn even more. I knew he couldn’t talk much with that dick around, but I still wished he would drop everything for me, just once.

“I mean what I said. Fix your shit!”

And with that, he hung up on me, leaving me stranded, completely alone.

*Fuck up!* My mind yelled at me as I walked the entire way from school to my house, and it still didn’t help burn away my anger.

I had demanded Grace to admit what we both knew, and by the way, my phone was vibrating deep in my pocket. She was feeling guilty. But she didn’t have to feel guilty - it was the truth.

I was even ignoring our soulmate bond because the thought of feeling her guilt and pity would send me spiraling down even more.

*I just needed to fix my head.* Thinking exhaustedly while a game plan was forming in my head. After we both cooled

down, I would find Grace tomorrow and have a heart-to-heart with her. I would apologize.

*I wouldn't let my circle break.* I thought, slamming my broken front gate.

I winced as the metal door handle clanged loudly, announcing my presence. I really didn't want to face Laura at this moment. I already felt exposed as it was.

The smell of cooked food was the first sign that something was off as I entered the front door.

It wasn't the usual stale takeaway pizza smell that I was sure had embedded in the walls. Instead, I felt a warmth drifting through the hallway, bringing the smell of a home-cooked meal. A pull of familiarity I haven't felt in a very long time. My heart swelled with a sense of longing nostalgia.

I paused as I closed the front door behind me, listening out. I heard nothing. It felt too silent, knowing that my family was here. I could even feel a thick tension in the air that the smell of warm food was bringing.

Slowly walking down the hall, I noticed that many of Dad's papers that he had hoarded, that usually were scattered along the hallway, were organized. Like someone had tried to make it tidy but gave up halfway. You could only do so much with mushy paper ingrained into the carpet without ripping out the entire thing.

*Had Dad finally seen the light and was now trying to be better?* My mind raced with skepticism.

I stopped at the sight in front of me as I passed the kitchen.

I felt sick, wave after wave of silent ringing hitting me, forcing me to grip the doorway as I swayed at the scene.

It wasn't the fact the dad's hoard was conveniently pushed to the back of the room, granting the oven top to be exposed for the first time in four years. Even the trash at our large table was relocated, allowing my entire family to sit and eat.

Both of my dads, Laura and.... Beau and Liam...

All heads were already turned, facing me. My dads paled with guilt-stricken expressions while Laura had a smug look on her piglike face. But I ignored the three of them. I couldn't stop looking at the two I hadn't seen in years.

Beau had gotten fatter. The bulging beer gut was now forcing his upper body to curl over it. His beard, which I remembered as always being well kept, was now scruffy with a few gray hairs littered and intertwined with his dark brown ones.

He dropped his cutlery sharply when his gaze caught mine. The ringing of metal meeting porcelain was loud in the stunning silence. He pulled his eyes off me, most likely unable to tolerate seeing the reason for his circle member's death.

Another figure I hadn't seen for a while, my older brother, Liam, sat beside Laura. He was different now, older. His chubby face was the exact image of Beau. Last I heard, he worked on an oil rig, working six months straight with nothing but the ocean around.

A job usually pawned off by society for the Mundane, but I guess, like father like son, he was running away.

Everyone but Beau stared at me, while Laura and Liam glared at me like I ruined their evening with my presence.

Here they all were, having a family dinner without me.

“Lucas,” Dad said, slowly rising from the table, “I didn’t know you would be home today.”

Not even, *‘pull up a chair and join us, son.’*

Never us, only me and them.

It was a Monday night. I tended to not come home a few days a week, but with what had happened with Grace, I had no desire to sleep at random people’s places.

I said nothing, unable to look away from Beau. It had been years since I last saw my other so-called father... Yet he refused to look at me.

*‘I can’t stand to look at him!’* Beau’s words in my head were just as loud as they were then.

“We might have some leftovers for you,” Dad said, casting his eyes around the table for their opinion before looking at their half-eaten plates.

*Would you look at that,* I thought, feeling my heart sink as I recognized the meal. It was the meal dad mentioned he wanted to make for a family dinner. But in that fantasy of his, surely I was meant to be there, right? But instead, I was offered leftovers...

“I’ve unfortunately gone off my food.” Liam spat, his cutlery coming down sharply, making my biological dad flinch. But Liam’s eyes were firmly on me, and I could read them easily. *You’re not welcome here.*

“He reeks of weed.” Laura said snippily, her nose pointed upwards like that would help.

“I’m sure it’s the smell of the sulfur coming off you.” I nipped back, my anger rising. I was slightly thankful for Laura’s comment. The familiarity of her foulness melted away my shock.

“Does he still go on calling you a hellhound?” Liam sighed dramatically, “What an immature child he is. Who would have thought aging was just a concept.” His smug grin looked ripe for a good punch in his motherfucking jaw.

Before I could retaliate, Beau’s fist came down hard on the dinner table, making all the cutlery tremble. The sudden slam jolted everyone, bringing the kitchen to a silent standstill.

Laura flushed, going utterly docile, casting her eyes down at the table. Simon had fully zoned out. He always avoided confrontation and would either walk away or completely withdraw in on himself if he felt like he couldn’t escape.

I eyed Beau wearily. He had the biggest temper when I was younger. His emotions would appear so suddenly without any reason. A simple sound or look would set him off. It was like walking on eggshells around him.

I could feel the thumping of my heart racing as we all watched Beau wearily.

Dad gave him a weak smile, his need to get on their good side was just as massive as his remorse for having me. I could see both emotions battling it out in his expression, the conflict evident in his eyes as they darted between Beau and me.

What would win? The need for the approval of his circle or his own biological son?

It was obvious what side he was already on.

I could feel the bubble of anger rising within me, my fists clenched tight as I struggled to contain it. The need to lash out and make them understand how they were treating me like I ruined their meal was overwhelming.

*Why not tip the dinner table over? My mind thought. I ruined it already, so doing anything else would be the cherry on top. They expect it anyway.*

I was still standing there, looking like an outsider and an idiot.

“Heard you got a circle member.” Beau’s voice was a deep rumble like he was speaking from his chest. The type of voice that always sounded like he had to put in the effort to even talk. It always sounded so emotionless, so distant.

Or was that only when he spoke to me?

He still didn’t look my way. Instead, his face was directly forward while he picked up his knife and fork, cutting into his meal.

“Yes, Grace. Lovely girl.” Dad said, smiling, but I didn’t know why. He didn’t know a single thing about Grace. “She’s Brenda’s daughter.” He added, reminding me that my family grew up with Graham and Brenda during high school.

It was then Beau’s turn to pause, his eyes flickering to me before going onto my dad, “The fates sure are mocking bastards.”

“I’m sure Susan would be smiling joyfully at the thought of being connected to Brenda,” Dad said, still smiling while the rest of us flinched at the mention of mom’s name. It was hardly ever used for a reason.

“You look a mess, boy,” Beau stated, ignoring my dad’s attempt to be upbeat. “You need a haircut and for those things to come off your face.” He pointed at the two piercings on my eyebrow and lip.

“And who are you again?” I spat with bitter sarcasm.

“Lucas,” Dad whispered with a begging plea for me to keep my cool.

“You’d do well to remember to respect me.”

I spat out a laugh, shaking my head. “I lost all respect for you the day you left.” My emotions were boiling over as I looked at the man I hated with a fierce passion.

“I see you haven’t been disciplining the boy.” Beau said, turning to both of my dad’s with a scoff, “I’ve also noticed your lack of care for my house.”



“This isn’t your house!” I sneered, stepping further into the kitchen. There was no way I was allowing him to waltz in here and give a review on our lives. He lost that privilege when he left.

“From what I remember, I bought this place. I still pay for the mortgage.”

I sent a surprised look to my dad. One was off with the fairies, while the other looked sheepish.

I didn’t know they were still relying on him.

“Don’t look so surprised. There are certain things parents keep from their children.”

“You’re not my dad.”

“You’re right. I’m not.” Beau said, pulling away from the table and coming toe to toe with me. I was taller than him, but he was obviously heavier than me. He leaned into my space, making my nose recoil at the heavy scent of hard liquor on his breath.

His addiction was still alive inside him.

“If you were mine, I would have the balls to convince my Susan to get rid of you. Then she would still be here, wouldn’t she?” Beau said, sending a dark look at my dad, who had significantly sunk lower into his chair.

The silence was heavily ringing in my ear.

*You are meant to cherish your circle! Not bring them down!*  
My mind raged at me, and the burning in my chest raged on.

Looking at my dad again with his defeated expression, I couldn't tame the fire inside me. The anger and betrayal that had been simmering inside me finally boiled over, the sight of Beau's face and the memories of the past flooding back.

I couldn't stop my fist from sailing into Beau's face.

Chaos erupted as Beau stumbled backward, crashing into the dinner table and onto the floor. The sounds of shattering plates and spilled drinks echoed through the room as Laura's screams and Liam's outraged roars filled the air.

But I didn't care about the commotion around me. My focus was solely on Beau, lying at my feet with a face contorted, taking on a violent purple shade as he glared at me. His arms flailed, and his legs kicked out as he struggled to get back on his feet, but his drunken state made it impossible for him to pull himself up. Laura had to kneel beside him to help him roll over and onto his knees.

*Pathetic.*

My knuckles ached from the force of the punch, but the satisfaction of finally standing up to him was worth it.

"Apollo, leave," Simon's voice finally interjected as he struggled to control Liam's rage.

"No problem, I'm going," I spat, my hatred for them all-consuming me.

"Lucas, wait!" My father called out, his chair scraping against the laminated floor as the rest of them continued to

raise their voices. I ignored him and continued to my bedroom, already in ruins from my last breakdown with Laura.

*This wasn't a home. I would always be an outcast here.* I needed to stop thinking. I refused to have a breakdown here, especially in front of them.

I couldn't stay here.

"Lucas," My father spoke as he entered my room for the first time in a year.

"How long?" I asked, shoving random items of clothing into my duffle bag, "How long have you all been having secret family time behind my back?"

Because I wasn't a fool. The number of times my father had asked me about my whereabouts and how long I would be away came to mind. Before, I would have seen it as a caring gesture, but now, witnessing this? I was questioning everything.

Dad said, looking down at his feet, "It isn't like that."

"No? Then what is it?" I asked, my voice rising as I headed over to my chest and slammed it open to grab the rest of my weed.

I halted over the empty white powder bag cramped into the trunk's side pocket. I had completely forgotten about it. I remembered all the times I looked at it throughout the night, wanting, needing it. It was a battle every day, but then Grace came.

I couldn't believe I forgot I still had the bag...

It was empty, but my sick mind imagined me licking the inside of it.

*Just a taste.*

I shook my head, forcing my dry mouth to become moist again.

“Me and your dad need to see Beau. We are a circle. You have Grace now, you understand. We had to see him every month. It...” He trailed off, clutching his chest. His bond did not allow him to open up to outsiders of his circle. But he didn’t have to say anything. I already had a sense because the thought of being separated from Grace and Vincent felt agonizing.

“Even when he speaks to you like that?”

“It isn’t all the time.” He spoke his excuse, but it rolled off my back. I couldn’t believe his delusion. “We were just trying to keep the peace.”

His words were like a slap in the face. The reality of my situation hit me like a ton of bricks. They had been trying to keep the peace, but at what cost? My feelings were just collateral damage.

“You were trying to keep the peace?” I repeated, my voice barely above a whisper before shouting, “But what about me!” I slammed my bag down in anger. My chest felt tight with frustration, my fists clenched at my sides.

“You must have known how it would make me feel to see you all together... Why am I shunned? I didn’t ask for any of

this! Please, explain to me!”

My dad’s expression crumpled, and a wave of guilt washed over me at the sight of the pain I had caused him. But a deeper, darker emotion stirred within me, one of anger and resentment. I wanted to hurt my own father for hurting me in this way.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “but he’s my circle member. You understand now, right? You would do anything for yours.”

Would I?

A part of me couldn’t imagine ever staying with a circle member who would treat me like that. But at the same time, I couldn’t see it ever happening. The thought of causing Vincent or Grace pain made my stomach churn with disgust. It revolted me to my very core.

But witnessing it. It showed me that a circle member could, in fact, intentionally hurt the ones that were made for them.

It was sick.

“I would never say anything to hurt them like that in the first place, dad,” I said, watching his expression fall.

“Anger is a consuming emotion,” he said, a delusional glimmer in his eye, “but I know my circle will come back to how we were before. Then, everything will be fine, and we will be a happy family.”

Normally, I would have gone along with his delusion to keep him happy.

But I couldn’t let him live in his fantasy any longer.

“Mom’s dead, dad,” I said, watching as his eyes went glassy with shock. “And when she died, so did your circle. It’s been nineteen years. Nothing will ever change.”

My dad stood there, frozen, unblinking to the point I doubted he was here in this room. He’d completely shut down. His eyes were wide and unseeing as they stared into the distance, his mind consumed by the pain of his loss and the lies he had been telling himself for so many years.

I turned away as the first tears slowly drifted down his cheeks. His open grief turned my gut, knotting it with guilt.

I picked up my bag from the floor and left my room. Beau’s voice was loud and furious, clanging plates echoing through the house as I passed the kitchen.

Their shouts of rage were all just background noise to me.

“You just have to ruin everything!” Laura spat, her venomous words following me out of the house. She always hissed and spat like a venomous snake. Her words struck me with their toxicity.

“Yep, that’s me,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady as I took a deep breath of the cool night air. I felt its freshness flow into my lungs, bringing a sense of calm to my chaotic thoughts.

“You can’t even let us have a nice family meal before you come and wreck it,” she sneered, her eyes filled with anger and resentment.

*She never ever fucking stops.*

“It’s what I do,” I replied, deadpan, as I tried to roll a joint, but my hands were shaking too much. I couldn’t even find a moment of peace.

“All I ever wanted was my family!” Laura’s voice followed me, her words ringing in my ears like a haunting melody. “And because of you, I have lost it all! You took my mother from me!”

I knew what she was trying to do. She wanted a reaction, but I was too exhausted to give her what she wanted. So instead of playing the villain she believed me to be, I did the one thing she hated the most: I ignored her.

“You hate seeing us happy, don’t you! You want everyone around you to be miserable!” She screamed, her voice filled with anger and accusation.

“I hate you!” She screamed, her voice growing louder and more frantic as she followed me.

*Don’t react.* I ordered myself while keeping my body rigid as her hands came down on my back, hitting me.

I quickly got in my car, turning the ignition on while Laura continued to scream out. Her words were unrecognizable, while her palm repeatedly hit my window. Her temper tantrum was probably disturbing the neighbors, and I would most likely be the talk of the neighborhood again.

“I hate you!” She shouted again as I made a hasty exit.

I could hear her screams as I drove away, the sound growing fainter with each passing moment. But even as I put distance

between us, her words and accusations still lingered in my mind.

*I hate you.* I thought silently back.



My feet dangled off the cliff edge. The view on the horizon of the cloudy night sky was a serene reminder of how lonely I felt. Night was always the worst time for the feelings to become overbearing. I thought I had already gotten used to that hollowness inside that longed for comfort, but it felt just as painful.

A mocking laugh escaped from me. Here I was, alone, I had two circle members, but they were nowhere in sight.

I pulled out the one thing I could truly rely on. The clear bag filled with the shredded green goodness was an excellent way to end a fucked up day. I could count on weed to cheer me up. It was always there waiting for me, never letting me down.

*Yeah, right.* My head throbbed in mockery. It ached like silent laughter that stung behind my eyes. But, who was I kidding, this shit didn't do much anymore. The attempts to numb myself were getting more difficult with every inhale. It wasn't hitting the right way.

***You know what else worked before.***

The dark velvet voice called to me. It brought the hairs at the back of my neck to rise like a dark phantom, making its



presence known. My mouth instantly went dry, longing for me to purge the parch. But no water could ever quench that thirst.

Only the white fluffy, moist powder that was-

*NO!*

Seeing that bag, reminding me of what was before, had shaken me more than anything else that had happened today. Just one simple empty bag had brought my body into overdrive.

I threw my blunt and the bag out into the open air. I forced my breathing to calm down while I watched the objects fall into the lake below. Bringing my hands into my hair, I pulled with all my might hoping to send the dark thoughts away.

I'd promised Vincent I wouldn't touch the stuff again.

*I promised!*

God, I couldn't lie and say the thought hadn't crossed my mind. Who wouldn't want a little high to make everything feel better? A little boost that shot through your body, purging it of all bad thoughts and feelings.

I shook my head, standing up and backing away from the ledge with a curse. The pressure behind my eyes was only growing.

*I don't need it,* my mind muttered as I edged back towards the cliff drop.

The dark waters gently brushed against the cliff. Silk rollers rippled across the quiet cool face of the water. Its peaceful

tranquility was the exact opposite of how I felt on the inside. Its calm silence called to my inner chaos. It practically begged me to jump, to envelop me in a brief bliss.

I was stronger than the compulsion. I'd fought it before, and when Grace showed up, she drove the cravings away. She was a gorgeous distraction.

But the truth was that distractions could only last so long. Reality would eventually catch up to you like a dark, haunting presence. Because distractions were just beautiful lies after all, and a part of me still felt the dark thoughts beckoning me to just give up.

To surrender to it all and to just allow myself to feel good again.

***It would be so easy to get some. Just a small taste for old time's sake. You've also been going through a lot.***

My thoughts were like silk, adjusted to whispering their pure toxic delights. They were just a mockery of sympathy. I had to remind myself of that.

But I couldn't deny the tainted velvety whispers that brought adrenaline coursing through my veins.

Heart pumping, mouth drying, and lungs racing. My hands trembled while I felt a bead of sweat run down my back, spreading a chill as it went.

Looking back down at the dark depths, I felt the looming dread nipping at my ankles. It wanted to coax me back, to go back to my bedroom, find the empty packet, and lick at the

reminder of the high I once had. Or even better, find one of the many stashes I knew about in town. But I couldn't.

I couldn't allow the temptation to take me.

Instead, I jumped.

And just maybe, I wouldn't come back up.

# CHAPTER NINE

## GRACE

**A**n uneasiness settled deep in my gut as I walked through the halls of my school. The tight feeling twisted and curled with small, faint somersaults, sending waves of nausea up my throat as a lingering dread built within me. I couldn't shake the feeling that something was off, and I knew why.

Lucas has been absent from school and wouldn't respond to my texts or calls. He had gone completely radio silent, though our bond reassured me that he was physically okay.

Psychology was another matter.

Our bond felt dull and wilted, like a dim light that had been snuffed out. Every time I reached out to it, trying to reignite the fire that was our connection, it would give a half-hearted pulse back. It was like trying to coax a response from something that had lost the will to live. I knew the reason for Lucas's self-pity and withdrawal, and it was all my fault.

*'I didn't want you.'* I berated myself again for having spoken those cursed words. It was the truth in a sense. I didn't

want to find my circle members, but fate had decided otherwise.

I was thrown into a situation I wasn't prepared for - two members of my circle, both of whom now had a place in my life, neither of which I was prepared for. I cared for them in a way I had never experienced before. They each had their own lives, families, and problems, and they had very different personalities, yet I had come to cherish and respect both of them.

I didn't want my circle before, but now I was glad I found them.

I'm grateful for Lucas, even though suddenly finding him had been a shock. I needed to be thrown into his whirlwind. Otherwise, I doubted I would ever have found anyone.

*If I had never found Lucas, I would've continued to live a half-life.*

The thought of losing Lucas, my burning supporter, sent shivers down my spine. His passion and loyalty had become a beacon in my life that fate knew I needed. I knew I could always count on him to be there, cheering me on and lifting me up when I needed it most.

The thought that I needed him more than I had ever realized hit me hard.

I should have told him how much he meant to me, but it was too late. I'd watched helplessly as he shut down, ignoring our bond and not feeling the depth of my true feelings for him.

My words crumbled him, causing him to spiral into self-hatred. I should have seen the warning signs, the remaining faith he had for us. But, instead, I had pushed him over the edge, and his doubt had only grown.

*And it was all my fault.* The weight of my guilt pressed down on me again, making it hard to breathe.

“Any news?” Vincent’s voice whispered behind me, jolting me from my thoughts.

I wasn’t surprised that he was able to creep up behind me in the school corridor. I hadn’t been paying attention in class or in any social interaction.

My heart ached with worry as I constantly scanned the crowds of students, searching for Lucas’s familiar face. Every time I heard the sound of laughter, my stomach twisted with hope and then disappointment when I realized he wasn’t there. Yet, despite some of our classmates’ cruel words and judgments, Lucas brought a contagious energy and light to those around him.

“No,” I muttered thickly, feeling a hot tear slip down my cheek.

Vincent’s cool composure was a stark contrast to the turmoil inside of me. “He will show up eventually, Grace. He does this from time to time,” he said calmly,

“I’ve really messed up, Vincent.”

Vincent gently touched my sleeve, pulling me along. “Come with me,” he whispered, leading me out of the school and

around the corner, away from the view of the dorm building. The fresh air and the quiet were a welcome change from the noise and chaos inside.

As soon as we were out of sight, Vincent embraced me. I felt my mind reeling with shock as the minty freshness of his cologne enveloped me. His body felt dense with hard muscles under his clothes, clothes that you could tell were expensive by touch alone. It made me hesitant to pull at them to get closer to him.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Grace,” Vincent whispered, his breath tickling my ear as his hand gently caressed my back, comforting me.

“But he thinks I don’t want him.”

Vincent pulled back and gave me a crooked smile holding a hint of sadness as he replied, “Then he’s a complete idiot if he believes that.”

“But I don’t want him to believe it!” I said, feeling a sense of urgency to take action. “We need to fix this. I can’t just wait around for him to maybe come back.”

“He will come back,” Vincent said, his voice calm and reassuring. “This is something he needs to deal with on his own.”

“But I want to help,” I protested.

“You can’t,” He muttered softly, his hand cupping my cheek, rubbing his thumb against my skin. “You know about his father’s circle, right? About the issues he’s dealing with?”

I nodded, remembering how Lucas looked at a picture of all of his dads together with anger and disgust.

“He mentioned it in passing,” I said, feeling a fresh wave of sadness wash over me.

“When his mother died, his parent’s circle fell apart.” Vincent explained softly, “From what I can tell, Lucas’s fathers loved Susan to the point that she became their circle’s heart. When she died, they crumbled. Beau took his son and left. He left not only his circle members but his two other children that night. Making the youngest know that circle members, who were destined to love each other, could leave in the blink of an eye.”

“Lucas is scared that will happen to us. He thinks we will leave him.” I whispered, understanding dawning on me. “I made it worse.” I let out a frustrated sigh, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt him.”

Vincent shook his head with a sigh, “Lucas thinks he is this broken monster that drives people away. I sometimes think he does the worst thing he can think of because he thinks that’s what people expect of him.”

“He is not broken.”

Vincent gave me an amused huff, “Oh, I know. That’s why I believe you have done nothing wrong. Lucas is a big boy. He can handle a tongue-lashing or a few words of honesty- don’t give me that look. We all know how you didn’t want a circle.”



“But I didn’t mean it like that! I do want him. I want his wild spirit, his fearless plans, everything about him! I know he isn’t perfect, but at the same time, he is in his own way. He needs to see that.”

“I know,” Vincent’s voice was cool and emotionless, unlike my burning frustration. “But, Grace, you must understand that neither of us can truly help him. No words or grand gestures will ever change his mind. He needs to come to that realization on his own.”

“You haven’t fully opened up to him, have you?” I asked, my frustration building. “If you had, you wouldn’t be so dismissive of this. Lucas is the most uncertain and fragile person I’ve ever met. If you opened yourself fully to him, you would feel the weight of his self-loathing, doubt, and fear.”

“He wants to be needed, Vincent,” I pressed. “You can’t just ignore it and hope it will disappear by brushing him aside. Lucas isn’t a rubber ball that will always bounce back. He has a puncture, and I’ve been ignoring it because I’ve been worried about you and our bond.”

“I’ve never asked you to worry about me, Grace,” Vincent muttered softly.

I knew he didn’t mean it in a cruel way, but his words didn’t help soothe my frustration with him.

“No, you didn’t. Just like Lucas didn’t ask for help! We are meant to be a circle. We’re meant to worry and care for each other! I know it must be difficult to care for anyone else but

yourself, Vincent! But come on!” I shouted, uncaring if anyone had heard me.

“I did look after someone,” He whispered, “I looked after Lucas in the hospital.”

I instantly deflated at the sadness in his tone.

Vincent let out a long sigh, “I was there for him all the months it took for his recovery. I felt his pain every day when they took off his bandages. I heard him cry in pain like they were tearing his skin off. It felt like it, too, though what I felt was only an echo of what Lucas was really feeling, and every time Lucas would always smile. No matter how much pain he was in, I felt his pure happiness at finding me.” Vincent’s words were laced with disgust.

His face fell with misery that I had never seen on him before. Vincent was making an effort to open up, and I could see the scars of the trauma he held close to his heart.

“At his bedside, he told me how he pictured our life. What he expected, how excited he was, and how much he couldn’t wait to start our life together.” He continued now the dam he unleashed he couldn’t stop.

“He stopped smiling for real once he realized I wouldn’t open up to him once I worked out how to....” Vincent added softly.

I knew that Vincent’s closed-off nature had caused a rift in their relationship, and it was clear that it still weighed heavily on him.

“You think he’s disappointed in you,”

“Oh, I know he is,” Vincent replied, his smile brittle. “He’s made jokes about it, but I can see it in his eyes. I am not what he imagined.”

“Vincent,” I said, feeling a pang of sadness for him.

“Don’t feel sorry for me, Grace. I’m trying to make you understand. None of us are what we imagined. Lucas wanted a picture-perfect circle that would forever be devoted to him. And you, you didn’t want to find us until you were ready.” He shrugged. “So don’t be sorry for telling the truth. Lucas has no leg to stand on when he is disappointed in us too.”

I turned my head, swallowing the bile that was rising in my throat. I had never expected to be a disappointment to my circle. The thought brought a feeling of disgust across my skin, making me itch and feel dirty.

Was this what Lucas and Vincent felt like?

“And what about you? What did you imagine your circle to be like?” I asked cautiously.

“Not like this, that’s for sure,” he said, his smile turning into a full grin. But then his expression grew serious, “Perhaps I would have told you sooner.”

“No regrets on how Lucas found out?” I asked, trying to lighten the mood by smirking, remembering how they found each other - by Vincent punching Lucas.

“I have many regrets when it comes to Lucas,” he said, his eyes trailing as his mind wandered.

“Lucas cares for you, you know,” I said, placing my hand on his cheek. It was a bold move on my part, but it was exactly what Vincent needed to come back to the present. “Every time you’re around, I can feel him. I feel his adoration and love for you.”

“Not a brewing anger where I may have to be concerned for my own life?” he asked, a hint of a smile playing on his lips.

I tried not to smile, “That too. I know he’s brash, crazy, and maybe kind of selfish, but he’s ours and... I love him.”

I love him.

“Even when he tells you things without a forward thought, causing unnecessary consequences?”

I blinked before narrowing my eyes at him. It seemed Lucas had told him more than what Vincent had let on.

“I never said he was perfect,” I muttered, crossing my arms defensively. “I thought you hadn’t seen him?”

“I haven’t, but I spoke to him last night.” It was Vincent’s turn to cross his arms defensively, but unlike me, he looked almost menacing. “Before you ask, yes, he told me about you finding out about Kristina.”

“What happened with Kristina?” I asked, searching for a hint of emotion in Vincent’s response.

“I didn’t know he was hiding it from you,” Vincent released a sigh, rubbing his forehead in frustration. “I thought you already knew. If I had known otherwise, I would have told you sooner.”

“Really?” I asked, my skepticism evident in my tone.

Vincent frowned, his head lowering as he avoided my gaze. “I promised you honesty, Grace.”

“You didn’t think it would break me?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

Vincent let out a short laugh, “No, although I can see Lucas being overprotective. He didn’t want it to come out in case you would leave him. The straw that broke the camel’s back and all that.”

“You really didn’t know?” I asked, trying to understand why Vincent would be so detached from the situation. “Not even with how Kristina was acting all of last week?”

Vincent then frowned, leaning his head at me with a confused look, “Why would I? I’m not her keeper.”

“But you... you did things with her.”

“That’s debatable.” He spoke in a monotone voice, a type of detachment that felt cold and dismissive like we were discussing something incredibly mundane.

My heart raced with anticipation as I asked in a trembling whisper, “Can you explain it all to me?” I felt an overwhelming need to know the truth, to face it all, and progress to become a better person.

I needed to grow up.

So what if my circle didn’t wait for me? They wouldn’t be with anyone else now that they found me. Lucas promised,

and Vincent said I had his loyalty. I needed to handle my emotions and let go of a past I wasn't present for!

Vincent looked at me with genuine curiosity and asked, "Will it help you to know the details? Or will it only add to the pain that I know you're feeling?"

"I want to know." Despite the sick feeling growing in my stomach, I was adamant about facing the reality of their past.

"We were at a party a year and a half back, and Lucas found her crying in the bathroom. Kristina is a sad drunk. To cut things short, she wanted control in her life before she would find her circle members. She came on to Lucas, even offered him money in her drunken state- much to Lucas's delight, the thought of someone paying just to be with him." Vincent shook his head before sighing, "I obviously put a stop to that."

I tried not to snort at the image of pride on Lucas' face at the thought of someone willing to pay him.

"Kristina promised never to say anything if we both swore to never say anything in return." Vincent continued, "Lucas and I had a long chat, and we both agreed. To her, she just wanted this control and believed I was experimenting with a guy for the first time."

"You had your first time with her?" I asked, feeling a knot form in my stomach at the thought of them sharing such a significant moment with someone outside of our circle.

"No, but she didn't know that."

A relief washed through me. As much as I was trying to work through my jealousy, I could only take so much.

“There were no feelings involved for each other. Lucas wanted to help his friend feel empowered.” He gave a shrug, “I personally don’t understand it myself, but I don’t think like Lucas. I would have simply refused, but he wanted to help her.”

I stared at Vincent, trying to read his emotions, but his face was a mask of indifference. Part of me felt relieved that he didn’t have any real attachment to Kristina, but another part of me couldn’t help but feel uneasy about his detachment towards her.

“You both... used her to be with each other?” I asked, trying to understand the situation.

“We did. And she used Lucas,” Vincent replied, his tone matter-of-fact.

I wrinkled my nose, “You make it sound formal.”

“Were you jealous at all?” I asked, knowing that Lucas had struggled with his own jealousy.

Vincent gave a pause, truly giving it a thought. “Maybe a little. But I wasn’t focused on her. I was enjoying Lucas more so than thinking about anything else.”

But another part of me couldn’t understand it. They opened themselves to each other and used each other for pleasure. That had to mean something, right? Or perhaps it was just my naivety showing. I’ve never explored my sexuality before. If I

did, would I think of all this differently? Or would both sides suffer?

*'Have you heard stories of a virgin circle not being able to satisfy each other? None of them knew what they were doing and ended up cheating on each other with Mundane.'* Lucas's voice was loud in my head. He had said those words at the party.

I had judged him then.

*"Don't fucking judge me. Just because no one is like you-a fucking prude- everyone at this party has been with someone that's not in their circle. All besides you."* I could still hear his mocking claps, *"Well done. You're better than all of us, you fucking saint."*

Lucas had a temper and a sharp tongue and wasn't afraid to show it before, but finding me had changed him into something more docile.

*Because of his fear.*

Something lifted inside me then.

As I thought about this, a new feeling stirred inside me. It pushed away the bitterness I had been feeling and made me realize I was acting like a child throwing a tantrum. I needed to stop expecting things to be a certain way because of societal expectations.

"You're allowed to be angry at us, Grace," Vincent muttered, his tone low. Even without our bond, he knew exactly what I was feeling. I wondered what he would know if



I opened up to him fully. “You’re allowed to show your disdain if knowing all this has hurt you. Like I said, we are big boys. We can handle it.”

“But Lucas,” I started, but Vincent interrupted me.

“Lucas shouldn’t have special treatment because he can’t handle his emotions,” Vincent said firmly.

His fingers on my chin sent shivers over my body. He held me in a gentle grasp, but it was one of the most grounding experiences I’d ever had. I couldn’t move as his cool, mint breath blew against my cheeks, and his gray eyes locked onto mine.

“If you wish to explore, I would understand,” Vincent said softly.

“What?” I exclaimed, pulling away from his fingers as a chill ran down my spine. The thought of venturing outside of our current dynamic filled me with dread.

“You would be fine with that?” I asked, my voice quivering. I was unable to fully grasp what Vincent had just offered. “Lucas would never suggest something like that.”

Vincent’s fingers closed around my chin firmly, his steel-gray eyes piercing into mine. “I told you, I am not Lucas,” he said, his voice firm yet gentle.

His expression softened, and he released me, his gaze still holding mine. “Between us, Lucas may be more of a selfish bastard, but I wouldn’t be fine with it either. But I would

endure it if it brought you peace. Some people like to have equal ground.”

“I don’t want to.”

“That’s okay,” he reassured me, “The offer will stand till another one of our circle members is found. Then we will talk about this again.”

“But Lucas-” I started, but Vincent interrupted me.

“Leave Lucas to me,” Vincent said as a wave of *deja vu* hit me, making me long for Lucas even more. “All I want you to do is get through school and relax. Lucas will show eventually, and if I see him, I’ll message you.”

With that, Vincent turned and walked away, leaving me standing there with a mixture of emotions swirling inside me.

I couldn’t shake off the unease that Lucas’s name brought. He was the wild card in our circle, and I couldn’t help but wonder what he would do if he found out about Vincent’s offer.

*Wait!*

“You knew I wouldn’t say yes, didn’t you?” I asked, going back to what he offered me. My voice was tight with frustration and anger. “That’s why you asked, knowing I would say no!” I shouted after him.

Vincent turned back with a sly grin on his face.

“What would you do if I changed my mind?”

“I wouldn’t hold it against you.” He yelled back before disappearing into the school.

“Asshole!” I shouted as the door closed behind him.

He knew exactly what he was doing. The anger that had been brewing inside me simmered down. Vincent always had a calculated motive behind his actions, and I couldn’t help but wonder if he truly believed I wouldn’t ever cash in on his offer. But even as the thought crossed my mind, I knew deep down that I never would.

Yet, a part of me wanted to just throw it back in his face.

I walked back into the school building, my mind still reeling at mine and Vincent’s conversation. He wanted me not to worry, but how could I not. He refused to feel Lucas through the bond. He didn’t know how limp it felt now.

*I’ll give him a day,* I thought to myself.

It was then I realized Mrs. Mason was making her way toward me. Unfortunately, her plump body had moved into my path, blocking my way toward the lunch hall.

“Ah, Miss. Millington, just the girl I wanted to see.” Her enthusiasm tickled my nose, threatening to bring me to sneeze. My stomach dropped menacingly as the feeling of being sick rose. I had no idea why she wanted me; I would rather she left me alone.

However, she ignored my look of discomfort as her hands grabbed at my shoulder.

“I want you to meet someone special.” She spoke in a quiet, hurried tone while she pulled me further down the hall, making me walk at her quick pace. A type of excited puffing was coming from her.

It reminded me of a dog wanting the ball to be thrown.

“Erm..”

*Did I even have a choice in this matter?*

“Mr. Boyed is one of the school’s main funders.” She explained as the name rang a few bells in my head.

*I’ve heard that name before...*

“You’re the latest student who has found their circle member. So you get the privilege to meet him- oh, he loves hearing students’ stories about how they met!”

I cringed at the way her face went dreamy.

“Ah...Who is he?” I asked, trying to hide the hint of dread creeping into my voice.

“Fates, child!” Mrs. Mason exclaimed, “His grandfather basically built this town. You must have heard of the Boyedmen Soap Factory?”

I hadn’t, but I nodded anyway, which seemed to please her.

I knew there were factories on the outskirts of town that kept the economy running, but they held little interest to me. But the name *Boyed* still dawdled in my head like an irritating itch.

*I have heard it before...*

It was then I remembered my grandma's talking about him at dinner. The way they spoke about him, it was close to being downright adoration for the man. And now, Mrs. Mason was leading me to him. The thought of meeting someone connected to such a powerful name made my stomach turn with unease.

"I have chemistry class that's about to start," I muttered in an attempt to escape the situation.

But Mrs. Mason didn't let go of my shoulder. Instead, her grip became firmer. She was notorious for showing off her students, often parading them around the school to showcase their talents. I had seen her do it before with Dylan, a musical prodigy, and Vincent, the school's overachiever.

I just never expected I would be one of them.

"Nonsense! You will be excused," Mrs. Mason declared, her voice stern and unyielding.

I couldn't come up with any other excuse. My mind was stumbling with the weight of the situation. I was to be paraded in front of the town's power figure.

As we approached the reception area of the school's general offices, my stomach stretched and twisted from nerves as I saw a lone man in a dark gray suit standing facing away from us, his body relaxed and hands in his pockets as he examined one of the paintings on the wall.

*I was trapped in this*, I thought to myself. Mrs. Mason's grip was daunting as she continued getting closer to him. It was too

late, as I was being pulled into a tide I couldn't escape from.

“Mr. Boyed,” Mrs. Mason greeted the man as we came up behind him, “This is Grace Millington.”

As Mr. Boyed turned to face us, a hint of boredom flitted across his features, but as his gaze settled on me, his dark brown eyes softened with a charming smile. He looked like the type of man who belonged in the city, in a boardroom, or on the trading floor, not in a small town like this.

“Pleasure,” His voice purred as he reached out to shake my hand. The air around him held a confidence and control, a type of ease that would make you assume he always got his way.

I froze as I stared down at this outstretched hand. A gold ring wrapped nicely around his pinky finger while a golden watch peeked out from under his cuff.

Mrs. Mason's huff at my lack of reaction only added to my discomfort, but Mr. Boyed's smile never wavered. He dropped his hand and casually tucked it into his pocket, the lingering scent of his aftershave and coffee filling the air around us.

“Your grandmothers have spoken a lot about you,” he spoke with an edge of amusement, the hint of a smirk playing at the corners of his lips.

I squirmed at the thought of them, feeling a pang of discomfort at the mention of the estranged part of my family. He seemed to pick up on my unease, chuckling softly before adding, “Nothing bad, of course. They just mentioned how quiet you are.”

He leaned down towards me, his dark brown eyes sparkling. “I, for one, don’t think that’s a bad thing,” he faked whispering, making Mrs. Mason chitter out a laugh. “But seeing how headstrong they are, I can understand your concerns,” he chuckled.

*What do I say to that?* I thought in a panic, sending a look toward Mrs. Mason to help me before I said or did something wrong.

“Grace here has found part of her circle with Mr. Moore.” Mrs. Mason spoke rapidly, still beaming at the man.

Mr. Boyed’s eyes crinkled at the mention of Lucas, but his smooth smile still remained in place. “Is that so?” he said with a curve of delight, making his eyes sparkle with silent laughter.

He took me in again, probably in a new light.

“Oh yes. You know about Mr. Moore, right?” Mrs. Mason asked.

“Yes, I’m well aware of Mr. Moore and his... *adventures* in my town.” He gave Mrs. Mason another charming smile before turning back to me. “Let’s hope you can keep him on the correct path, Miss. Millington.” He said with a chuckle that I could hear coming from his chest.

I had a feeling he knew I couldn’t control Lucas.

“Both Grace and Mr. Moore are currently undergoing lessons on how to be the perfect circle members for each other.” Mrs. Mason added with pride.

What she truly meant was that I was being judged while Lucas got ridiculed.

Mr. Boyed sent a delighted smile toward Mrs. Mason, “It’s good to hear that my funding is going to such a good cause and to see it paying off. I always love to hear stories of young people finding their circle members.”

*‘No children of his own, but still paves the way for the next generation. Such a selfless man,’* My grandma’s words echoed in my mind, painting a picture of a man who had never found his own circle or family.

Was he truly selfless in helping others find their own, or was it a way to fill the void in his own life?

“I’m glad you have come to this school with an open mind,” he said, his voice measured. “Your grandmothers were quite worried, given the attitude of your mother. They feared it would be passed down to you, but I’m happy to see that’s not the case.”

“You’ve done a marvelous job, Diana,” he continued, looking at Mrs. Mason with a warm, approving gaze. “Not many would handle such a difficult transition so well.”

Looking between the two of them, I couldn’t help but frown. My transition to this school hadn’t been completely smooth. The attitude towards my mother had students and some teachers openly preaching against me being here.

He either knew that, or Mrs. Mason had been saying otherwise.



Mrs. Mason blushed under his praise and gaze, “I only wish to pave the way for the students, Mr. Boyed.”

“Evidently.” His brown, calculated eyes went back to me, “I may have to send a dinner invite to your parents. If our young can exchange pleasantries despite their differences, then so can I. I always look forward to meeting my neighbors, especially the ones whose voices... are just as loud.”

“They would like that.” I lied with a tight swallow. They didn’t like dinners that had an agenda.

“I’m sure they would.” He smiled, but the look in his eye showed that he knew I was lying.

The hair on the back of my neck stood on end as he continued to look down at me, the lines at the edge of his eyes deepening with each passing second. Then, finally, Mrs. Mason gave a soft cough, breaking the tension and causing him to turn to her with an eyebrow raised, his smile disappearing.

“Shall we move on, Mr. Boyd?” She asked. I could see her throat bobbing with a slight nervousness.

“Certainly.” His smile came back, and he turned back toward me, “It was nice to meet you, Miss. Millington. Please tell Apollo to keep out of trouble, from me, won’t you?”

I nodded, backing away to allow them to pass into the corridor. As they walked away, a feeling of unease settled in my stomach. I’d met people who didn’t approve of my mother before. The experience would always leave me scrambled and

uncertain of what to say or do. But a certain warning crawled along my skin by his words.

I suspected it wasn't a good thing to have the town's founding family dislike you.

As I walked away from the encounter with Mrs. Mason and Mr. Boyed, I knew I needed to find a quiet place to collect my thoughts, and according to Mrs. Mason, I was already excused from my lesson anyway.

The library was often full during the breaks, but for once, only three students were seen at the tables, all either reading or studying.

Sitting down at one of the spare, empty tables, my hands itched to pull out one of the many leaflets I had on me. Since Andrew had come to the school, they were now everywhere, all with titles that made me want to look inside, just to see if any held a key.

***Be who your circle needs you to be!*** The words taunted me.

*Did we all really need to change for the people we were literally made for?*

I took a deep breath and tried to push these thoughts out of my mind. I knew that I couldn't let fear and negativity control me. I had to stay strong and believe in my circle.

"I'm not a pervert." A voice came from behind me, jolting me out of my thoughts.

Kai stood awkwardly, his hands rubbing his bare arms like he was holding himself together. Flicks of thick pale paint

littered his arms, clumping his thin blonde hair together. This was the first time Kai spoke first to me, and by our shocked expressions, it seemed I wasn't the only one to realize this. Kai looked like he wanted to take the comment back. Regret paled his face making the brown layer of freckles look darker than they were.

*Did he... Did he say what I thought he said?*

"What?" I asked quickly after realizing I had been staring at him for too long.

"My drawings... I know what they might look like, but it's not what you think." Kai spoke rapidly, "It's art. I'm not... I'm not like that." Kai stood there, his fist clenched and face redder than a tomato, but he still held firm.

"Erm," I drifted off as my own cheeks heated, "I don't think you're.... that, Kai."

"But you looked!" He said in a panicked jerk, his messy, dirty blonde hair falling over his eyes, making him blink at the sudden shift before he palmed his head to brush it aside.

"I did." I rubbed my face, hoping to cool my burning cheeks, "But I don't think you're a... pervert."

Oh god, I need to calm down. I thought to myself. My heart felt like it was about to take off.

"I thought they were beautiful." I forced the words out.

"What?" It was his turn to blink. "You... You liked them?" Realization hit him hard. Hard to the point that his voice choked in his throat as a look of disbelief stunned his face.

A rush of heat came over me as he looked down at the shredded front cover of his folder, picking at the edge of the plastic covering and twirling it between his thumb and finger.

I couldn't look him in the eyes as I nodded.

"They are really good. You're quite talented." My embarrassment felt like a heated chokehold as I struggled to breathe.

Kai flushed at my compliment, "Th-Thank you.... I'm sorry If I've upset you before. Dylan said to talk to you-"

"Has he also seen your-"

"No!" Kai shouted in alarm., his voice carrying over to the front desk, where it earned a hiss of displeasure. He shot them an apologetic look before turning back to me.

"You're the first person to see them." He whispered, lowering his head with embarrassment. "Dylan only said to speak to you as he noticed I was...uncomfortable around you."

"I'm sorry," I apologized, feeling a deep sense of guilt. I knew I had overstepped his boundaries, diving into a private side of him that he had obviously never shown before.

Kai shook his head, stopping me from continuing.

"It was an accident, and I'm the worst when it comes to... well, people." He rubbed at his arms, his fingers picking at the spattered flicks on his skin.

"I think... I think it was a good thing." Kai muttered, bringing his thumb up to his mouth and biting his already short

thumbnail, “My uncle always says I should push myself before the world pushes me.” He gave a shy, hesitant chuckle with a shrug, his head was tilted downwards, but his eyes flickered between the floor and my face, watching my reaction. “I guess the world thought it was time to push me.”

“I like drawing and sculpting figures of people,” he added slowly, still avoiding direct eye contact. His cheeks, neck, and ears were a bright shade of red, a physical manifestation of his embarrassment and anxiety. “I get inspired by Hellenistic art, mainly sculptures with realistic anatomy. I’m not drawing that for... I don’t...” He tailed off, looking a bit lost as he tried to come up with reasons for doing what he did.

“You don’t have to explain why. People can like things just for the sake of liking them.” I said, hoping to ease his rising hysteria that was causing his jaw to twitch.

His smile lit up his entire face like a beaming star that warmed me. “I never really thought of it that way. I’ve been scared to show them...”

“I don’t know anything about art, but if you want me to look at them?” I offered, trying to be supportive, but I doubted he would accept it. The thought of him watching me look at the drawn naked people would most likely kill us both with humiliation.

Kai recoiled, his eyes went incredibly wide. “Er... Maybe, one day... Maybe. Let me work on it- I mean, you have seen some already....” He trailed off, looking deep in thought with a slight frown.

“It was just a suggestion. You don’t owe me anything.”

*Please don't actually agree to it otherwise, I might just combust!*

Kai hummed in response, his body fidgeting as the silence between us grew. It was as if his body wanted to flee, but by the way his eyes kept flicking back and forth between me and the desk. I could sense a hesitation, a desire to stay and reveal something that was on his mind.

“I wouldn’t look at those if I were you,” he said, his voice low and concerned. Kai swallowed, nodding to the flyers in my hands when I sent him a confused look.

“Looking stuff up is never a good thing,” he continued, his eyes locking onto mine before quickly looking away, his face flushing with embarrassment. “It never helps.”

“I was just checking them out,” I said defensively, feeling caught in the act. I quickly shoved the leaflets back into my bag.

Kai shook his head as he sat down next to me, our bodies close enough that I could feel the heat emanating from him.

“I’ve seen you looking at them a lot today,” he said, his tone gentle but filled with worry.

“You’ve been watching me?” I asked, surprised.

“A little...My mom, she....” He trailed off, taking a deep breath and shaking his head. “She looks up things too. Obsessively. It never helped her, just made her more anxious and scared.”

Shaking my head, “I’m not....” I began, but my words trailed off as a look of pity filled Kai’s eyes. Letting out a long exhale, I leaned further into my chair with a long sigh, “I might be a little bit worried,” I admitted.

“It’s how it starts,” he said, his voice low and understanding. “You get worried, start by looking up something, and it pulls you down a rabbit hole.”

I couldn’t help the note of desperation that crept into my voice as I spoke, “I just want answers. For my circle.”

Kai’s eyes lit up with excitement but then quickly softened with regret. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have pried. It’s none of my business,” he said, his voice tinged with remorse.

“It’s fine,” I reassured him, my voice calm and composed, as I brought the leaflets back onto the table, laying them out in front of us. “I know it’s not easy, but I just want to find my-our place in all of this. You have all this to look forward to when you find your circle.” I said as a joke, but it fell flat.

An amused huff came out of him before mumbling, “I doubt it.”

I smiled at his grumpy frown. It looked wrong for Kai to have such a look, but I guess for anyone who has any type of anxiety about social interaction, finding a circle could be incredibly daunting and feel impossible.

“I thought so too. Now look at me.”

“You’re lucky.” He spoke with a load of longing envy.

I paused, feeling a sense of gratitude wash over me. I was lucky. Only a few people would ever find a member, let alone two or a full circle.

It was something to be cherished, and I needed to improve for them.

“I- er, I better go, I just wanted to talk to you to... clear the air, but I’ll see you around? Maybe, talk more like this?” Kai said, looking a little unsure of himself.

“I would like that.” I said, giving him a genuine smile.

Kai grinned in return before starting to turn to leave.

“Kai?” I called out to him, causing him to stop and turn back to me. “Thank you.” I said, giving him a sincere smile.

It was Kai’s turn to grin, “Thank you too, Grace.” He said before finally leaving.



The next day I went over to Lucas’s house. I’d heard nothing from him since Monday, and to say I was worried was an understatement. Even Vincent was starting to show cracks.

From the whispers going around school, I knew Vincent’s growing irritation was already troubling the students and teachers. But I guess when your circle member wasn’t answering texts or having their phone completely turned off, it would tend to lead to anger.

But I couldn’t let Lucas continue to shut us out. I needed answers, and I wasn’t going to leave until I got them.



The anxiety gnawed at my stomach as I knocked on Lucas's door. I looked around the small front garden covered in tall weeds and junk. It looked more disarrayed than the last time I was here.

Minutes passed as I waited. I knew someone was inside from the light coming out the living room window. I knocked again, this time harder.

Still nothing.

Just as I was about to turn away, the door creaked open, and Lucas's sister, Laura, stood scowling at me, her blonde hair ruffled like she had just gotten out of bed.

I mentally winced. The last time I saw her, we didn't really meet as both Lucas and Laura were at each other's throats. I really didn't want to get off on the wrong foot with Lucas's family.

"Sorry to disturb you, but is Lucas here?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

"Nope." Laura yawned, cocking her hip to the side with her arms crossed. It was obvious she was denying me entrance.

"Do you know where he is?" I pressed, my worry for Lucas growing with each passing moment. If he wasn't at home, where else could he be staying?

"Don't know, don't care," she shrugged, not even bothering to hide her boredom while she picked at her nails.

How could she not care about her own brother's well-being?

My heart ached for Lucas. I knew of the broken relationship between him and his family, but truly seeing it was a hard pill to swallow. Before, when I saw him and Laura argue, I'd honestly believed it might have been jealousy because he found his circle, but this was something else.

*Were Vincent and I the only ones truly worried about him being missing?*

“Do you have any idea, a friend? Another family member?”

“Try a ditch?”

“That’s a disgusting thing to say about your brother!” I snapped, reaching my limit.

*How could she even suggest something like that!* The thought made me feel physically sick. It was only the bond between me and Lucas that eased me. I knew he was physically fine.

Laura burst out laughing at my outrage.

“This wallflower act is cute. I’m sure my brother is paying you well and all, but come on! You should at least be his type to make you guys being a circle believable.”

“Paying me?” I recoiled.

“Yeah, like, paying you to play house or something.”

“We wouldn’t lie about being a circle,” I stated, feeling a defensive curl sweep over me. The longer I stood here, the more I felt a dark heat pumping at my back.

She scoffed, “You obviously don’t know Apollo.” She sneered at his name like it was dirt, and I couldn’t help but bristle at her.

“I think I know more about Lucas than you do,” I said pettily.

“Know him so much better that you don’t know where he actually is?” She snarked sarcastically. Her delight at catching me in my own words sickened me.

I could see where Lucas got his sharp tongue from now. No wonder he could be just as aggressive with his words if he had to deal with this all of his life.

“You have no idea how toxic he really is, do you?” She burst out a laugh, “I cannot wait till he fucks it all up.”

“It’s obvious that you have no idea what it feels like to have a circle member.” I snapped back, and from the outwards glare she sent me, I’d hit the mark.

I didn’t like being mean. To be honest, it was the first time I resorted to this behavior, but I couldn’t allow anyone to bring Lucas down.

Not even his family.

“I know that a circle is meant to fix you.” Laura continued, “And since he ‘*supposedly*’ met his circle member, then explain why he is still a fuck up who does nothing but party and smoke weed every night?”

I stood there stunned at her words. ‘*Fix,*’ the words Lucas had said to me before.

The air between us was thick with tension as Laura sneered at me. I could see the taunt on her face. She wanted the fight, but what I didn't understand was why?

Was she really this full of bitterness?

If so, then I pitied her and her circle she had yet to meet. I've met many clients of my mother and have seen my fair share of bitter and spiteful people. They were the ones expecting all of their negative feelings to just vanish when they found their circle. People expected finding their circle would be the end of their problems.

"I hate to disappoint you, Laura. But your circle won't fix you when you meet them if that's what you're looking for. You would be their downfall." I said honestly, backing away towards my car.

Laura is what I feared I would turn into, and I genuinely hoped she would let go of her anger before it would be too late.

"Bitch!" Laura's yell sounded muffled from my car but was loud enough for me to hear the anger in her tone.

Sighing, I rested my head on my steering wheel and tried to coax Lucas's flame inside me to blaze like it used to before.

*Lucas, where are you?*

# CHAPTER TEN

## LUCAS

I groaned in my misery. Of course, thumping my head against the headrest of my car wasn't the best thing to do. But the thuds and vibrations helped stave off the party of pain my brain was currently having, thumping to its own beat.

Note to self, never have a two-day booze cruise in autumn, in the middle of a lake, without a boat.

I had spent the last few days wandering between my car and the lake, my clothes reeking and my hair now likely a home for local birds. All around, I felt like hell, but I couldn't go back to my parents, nor could I show up on Grace's doorstep like some stray dog.

It was that time of the year again when I couldn't just sleep anywhere I wanted. The cold air, combined with my damp skin, had forced me to spend the night and day in my cramped car, surrounded by piles of junk that wouldn't allow me to stretch out fully on the back seat. Now my back ached like a bitch.

Just another consequence of my actions.

I was a mess, but I still craved just one more day to go wild before I pulled myself together and faced reality.

There was always a party on the rich side of town. The rich side of town was always so big, with big lawns, houses, and parties. The neighborhood was full of sweet pickings for having a good time. It was always the people who had too much to spend that partied the hardest.

I groaned as my back strained with a tight agony as I got out of my car. The wind was relentless while it whipped around me, bringing a cold chill that made me shiver as I hurried up the stupidly long footpath to the front door.

I instantly regretted stepping inside. The deafening bass thudded through my body, threatening to overwhelm the rhythm of my heart. My senses were bombarded by flashing lights, heavy smoke, sweat, and perfume.

This place felt more like home than my own house. How sad was that?

“Apollo!” A chorus of greetings echoed as I entered the room. People, some drunk and dancing, others lingering, approached me with fist bumps and patted my back as I made my way to the kitchen.

I’ve been to this mansion before, especially on the upstairs bathroom tiled floor.

“Where the hell have you been?” Vincent’s voice came behind me, his tone booming as he marched towards me, his

piercing gray eyes ablaze with fury.

“Around,” I replied coolly, side stepping over people in my way at the kitchen entrance. I knew Vincent was right on my heel. I bet he would bite me if that wouldn’t raise a few brows.

“You smell like shit.” He helpfully stated while my eyes wandered over the drinks before me. One good thing about rich people having parties was the free booze they offered.

“Actually, that is the lake I’ve been living in for the last few days.” Plus, the weed that I was able to scavenge, I mentally added, but with the overpowering rotten egg smell that the lake gave me, I was sure that the skunk smell wasn’t noticeable.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Vincent sneered, getting close to my face while I poured myself a cold one straight from the keg.

“What do you think?” I replied, taking a long swig from my cup. “I’m here to drink and party. What else would I be doing? Washing dishes?”

Vincent’s sneer grew as I took another gulp from my cup, savoring the refreshing liquid as it flowed down my throat. I could feel the warmth of the alcohol spreading throughout my body.

Vincent moved even closer, his breath hot on my face as he muttered in a low voice, not wanting others to hear, “Grace has been worried sick.”

“Not you?” I asked with a raised brow like the petty bitch I am.

“I already know what you’re like. But she doesn’t.” He snapped, obviously hating my attitude.

Has he ever been happy with me?

I hummed before taking a few large mouthfuls of beer. I might have to hit the harder liquor supply if Vincent continued like this.

If he wanted to act overbearing, I could do the same in my own way.

“You need to lighten up, Vinny.” I taunted, trailing my finger down his cheek, feeling it jump as he continued to scowl at me.

“Do you want to fight in one of the upstairs bedrooms?” I stepped closer, allowing my hand to move downward and over his crotch, feeling the firmness behind his jeans as a sign of his arousal.

Vincent loved to put me in my place.

I longed for him to do so. I loved the fight, the way he overpowered me to the point of bliss. It always sent me into a cool wave of relaxation when his hands gripped me, making it impossible to break his hold as he fucked me.

I could feel my own heat ramp up at the feeling of him in my hand.



My mind raced for the perfect comment to get him to snap, to hold onto my neck, and lead me upstairs for him to use.

I panted, a small whine escaping my mouth as I edged my lips closer to his. I couldn't stop my tongue from coming out to lick at the metal ring against my lip. Already I could taste the minty freshness from his mouth. I ached for him, for his tongue's feel and taste.

I needed him.

But Vincent backed off, making sure we were a few steps away from each other.

"The last time we were at a party like this," he began, his voice low and piercing, "you caused chaos, and once again, I have to remind you," he stepped closer, his voice dropping to a whisper, "you smell like shit."

I outright glared at him before huffing in annoyance, backing off, trying to ignore my hardened dick that hadn't yet realized it had been passed up.

"Your loss," I shrugged, "now let me get drunk and pass out till tomorrow."

"If you think-"

"Err, Vincent?" A concerned voice came to my right.

A younger guy was there, looking between Vincent and me with a concerned look.

"What the fuck do you want?" Vincent snapped round at him.

The guy cringed, stepping back from Vincent's glare. The sweat glistened from his brow, making his brown hair even darker. I knew for a fact that it wasn't from the heat of the house. His pale face looked sickly while his hand drifted down to the rucksack that should be casually thrown over his shoulder, but it rested at his side, guarded, with his hand gently on top of the zipper.

My breath left me at that moment. I couldn't stop myself from focusing on the bag.

I knew exactly what was inside.

*Just one more time.*

"You told me to stay with you." The guy muttered, looking a little lost. His eyes again shifted around the room like he expected someone would jump him at any point.

"Got yourself a new lapdog?" I asked while pouring myself another beer, but I was completely ignored.

"Should I leave you two alone?" The other guy asked, looking very confused at both of us while looking for his chance to escape.

"No." We both said, which caused me to smile.

*Look at us being so in sync.*

Vincent must have realized how open we truly were as a singular blink came on his face before a look of determination.

"Actually, give us a second, JD," Vincent spoke as he grabbed my collar, hauling me to the side.

“Nice meeting you, JT!” I shouted with a wave. The young guy looked concerned as his eyes glanced around the room.

He was way too twitchy for the job.

Poor guy wouldn't last.

Vincent wasn't soft as he pulled me aside and dragged me into an empty room that looked like some office.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Vincent sneered, slamming the door before getting close to my face. His teeth bared. It was the only time he showed his perfect whites.

“Seeing my circle member,” I said casually, leaning on the desk behind me. But you would have thought I was shouting down the house as Vincent looked around back at the door, making sure it was closed, so no one heard.

“The one you should be seeing is at her home, where you should be right now, fixing the shit that you stirred up!”

I said nothing as I focused on the beer in my hand, taking huge gulps of the bitter taste in hopes of filling the pit that my stomach was gnawing at.

“Go to her, Lucas.”

“I will.” I said snippily. I was just not ready to face her just yet. I was too worked up, too juiced. I needed to let loose before going to her.

Vincent gave a scoff, clearly not impressed with my answer.

“What?” I asked, feeling the leftover anger rise again, “You want me to go to her like this?”

It would practically be relationship suicide with my emotions currently high. I wasn't going to risk it.

Vincent shook his head, "You shouldn't have got yourself in this predicament in the first place."

"Fuck. You," I sneered, rising to my full height and getting right up in Vincent's face. "You don't know shit."

"Well, you're right about that," Vincent retorted, a sarcastic edge to his voice. "Because you've been missing for the last few days!"

The air between us became lighter as the earlier tension dissipated.

"My dad's...." I let out a bitter laugh, "Jesus, my whole fucking family has been holding secret meetings behind my back. I stumbled upon them all together after our phone call, acting like one big, happy, fucking family." I spoke through gritted teeth, filled with resentment, before chugging the rest of my beer.

"Why didn't you come to me?" Vincent asked, frustration evident in his voice.

"Fuck you!" I roared, throwing the empty cup at him. "You expect it to be so simple? News flash, Vinny, neither you nor Grace wants to deal with my shit - that's been made crystal fucking clear."

"You're a fucking idiot. Of course, she does. You need to wake the fuck up!"

“You don’t know anything. I feel her, not you. I knew she didn’t want me.”

“I’m going to say this once, Lucas, and it better get through your thick skull. Grace didn’t want a circle in the first place. We both know that, but she wants us to stick around for some odd reason. She isn’t going to leave you.”

“Why doesn’t it bother you? If we never accidentally touched, we would never have found her!”

“But we did. There is no point thinking of what ifs.”

“Of course, you would fucking say that. Nothing shakes you, does it- oh wait, our bond freaks you out, doesn’t it.” I spat out the taunt, my anger seething to the surface.

Vincent’s voice was like a sharp blade, slicing through my fury and striking a nerve. “Stop it, Apollo,” he commanded in a tone as cold as ice. “There are many things you can say or do to me, but crossing that line is not something I will tolerate.”

I knew I was acting out and couldn’t help but lash out.

Vincent could shake my foundation in the blink of an eye, and I hated how much power he had over me. I hated how simple he found life when in actual fact, it wasn’t!

“I wonder what Grace would say if I told her the whole truth? What if she found out you were a fucking drug dealer?” I knew I was taking a dangerous risk, but I couldn’t help myself.

In a flash, I found myself slammed against the wall, my back exploding with pain. The bookcase shook from the

impact with a rumble, causing some books to tumble onto the floor around us.

“Fuck,” I groaned out the last breath I had in my lungs. My back erupted with pain making me arch my back like I could move away from it, but the pain only flared from my movement.

Vincent’s grip tightened, and I could feel my shirt choking me as we both struggled to breathe. The look in his eyes was a mixture of anger and fear, and I knew I had hit a nerve. I was playing with fire, but I couldn’t help myself. I was consumed by my own anger and resentment.

I felt the weight of Vincent’s anger pressing down on me, the fury radiating off him like heat from a furnace.

The bond between us cracked and splintered. It strained with a fierce pulse at our aggression towards each other. Vincent had his fucked-up wall, but he couldn’t block the bond itself forever. It always filled me with a sense of power when we fought. It was the only way I could make him feel our bond.

The connection between us twisted and turned, pulsing with a sickening energy that punished us both with each passing moment.

Vincent’s pained groan escaped his lips while a gleam of sweat built along his forehead, wetting his dark hair strands. His facade was starting to crack, and I could see the fear and uncertainty in his eyes.

“What’s wrong, Vincent?” I sneered with mockery as I twisted that invisible knife deeper. “Can’t handle the truth? Or does it scare you that Grace might see who you really are?”

“Shut up!”

But I couldn’t. I never could stop once my anger took over. I attacked and attacked, over and over again, till the person either hit back or broke. And Vincent never breaks.

“Does your ego boost when I fuck up? Does it give you the opening to play a hero to her, Vinny? Does your cock throb when her innocent gaze settles on you, looking for you to look after her?”

Deep down, people were the same; we all had our habits, and Vincent loved to play the hero. He thrived in it, but his addiction to the darker lifestyle forced him to be someone else. But that never stopped him before. He played the part when I was hospitalized, and I had a hunch he liked those who were spiraling just for him to have a chance to help and then hold control over.

Me and Grace were Vincent’s wet dream come true. What a shame he couldn’t truly do what he wanted, as his job controlled everything.

“For your information, I have been trying to explain how your fucked up mind works!” Vincent gritted out, still holding me like he wanted to shake me up.

“I bet you just loved that.” I laughed with a shake of my head. “I fucked up, and you just swoop in with your serene

fucking personality, making it all okay.”

“Fuck you!” He spat, bringing a smile to my lips.

“I wonder what she would say if I told her everything? Do you think she would appreciate how you have completely fooled her?” I was most definitely playing with fire, but if I couldn’t party, I was going to have a fight.

“You wouldn’t.” Vincent growled, his voice low and filled with a warning, narrowing his eyes.

“Wouldn’t I?” I raised an eyebrow. My smile felt slimy, but I was too far to stop now. “Because, at this point, I’m the only one out of the two of us getting punished. When in actual fact, I’m the only one trying to get the truth out. It might be nice for someone else to be the great disappointment for once!”

“You will not tell her!” He hissed, reminding me of hot sizzling oil. “This is an exception. I won’t have this life tainting her.”

“Fucking Hypocrite!”

“I’m working on leaving them!” Vincent replied, but I wasn’t convinced.

I learned that lesson a year after we found each other.

“Yeah, fucking, right! How many times have you said that? You asked me to give you a month for you to get out. Guess what, Vinny? Times up.”

Vincent roughly let me go, stepping back with his glare still on me. A smile spread across my face, but no humor was



behind it.

“Yeah, that’s right. You say shit about being so fucking honest, but you can’t look her in the eye and tell her you’re actually a bad guy.”

“Get out of my sight, Apollo.” Vincent snapped, his voice cold and cutting.

“There you go again, running away. Coward!” I hissed, getting into his face, and for once, Vincent backed off, and I couldn’t help but feel a sense of satisfaction wash over me.

“I don’t want you here!” He growled, his cutting words striking me hard.

“You never fucking do.” I muttered as he stormed out of the room.

As he left, I noticed an open cabinet opposite me filled with glass bottles of what I could tell was expensive whiskey.

*Don’t mind if I do*, I thought as I snatched one of the large glass bottles.

Biting down on the cork, I tore it from the bottle with a satisfying pop. I eagerly took a gulp of the fiery brown liquid. It blazed a trail down my empty stomach, filling me with its scorching heat.

“Fuuuuuuck,” I breathed out, feeling my breath could almost ignite with the sheer intensity of the spirit.

This shit was mine for the night.

I took another swig, groaning out loud from the smooth fire that felt like silk going down my throat. The alcohol was like a seductive flame, luring me deeper into its embrace with every sip as the world's weight lifted from my shoulders. With every sip, I felt a rush of adrenaline coursing through my veins. My heart pounded in my chest, and I felt alive. I felt empowered, strong, unbreakable even.

Fuck Vincent if he thought he could stop me!

Stumbling out of the office, the volume of the party increased. The beat of the music pulsed through me, its bass so powerful that it seemed to shake the walls and floor beneath my feet.

Vincent and his new lackey were alone together, talking, and by the way, the guy was looking. It wasn't a nice chat of catch-up.

"Don't sell him anything," Vincent growled before I could make some snarky comment as I approached them. But he stormed off with his phone to his ear. Not even looking at the pout I sent his way as he left.

*Asshole.*

I flipped my middle finger towards Vincent's back before turning back to JB. I must have had a certain look on my face as the younger guy paled and took a step back.

"You're mundane, right?" I heard the slur in my voice as I stepped closer to the nervous Nancy. That would explain the sweat beads dripping from his brow along with his quickened

breath. Everyone knows what happens to a Mundane, who gets caught up on the wrong side of the law.

I watched his shoulders tense in a defensive stance while wrapping his arms tightly to the bag that could ruin his entire life. Even in my state, with the world tilting off its axis, I knew he wasn't cut out for this shit. I was sure he was struggling like every other Mundane.

Desperation makes people do things they never thought of doing before.

The guy tried sending me a glowering look, "Piss off."

Laughing, I raised my hands in surrender. "I'm not judging. Everyone has a right to earn a living, and if selling something is what it takes, then so be it."

JT narrowed his eyes in suspicion, sizing me up like he wasn't sure what to make of me.

"In fact, I'm Vincent's top buyer," I added, trying to sound confident while my heart pounded in my chest. I knew I was playing with fire, balancing compulsion and sobriety.

Don't do this! The voice inside me warned, reminding me of the year I had spent battling my demons and the pain I had endured to get clean. But the lure of the high was too strong, and my body still trembled with longing for the rush of euphoria.

Just a small taste.

JQ squinted at me like I was a liar. Okay, I wasn't exactly a buyer... but I was his number one.

Sort of.

*'I don't want you here!'* Vincent's words came back, reopening the new fresh wound.

"Why do I doubt that?" JM asked, shuffling around nervously as my eyes trailed to his hand hovering over the rucksack.

Right there.

"Believe what you want, but I can make it worth your while," I said, trying to sound casual, but my voice betrayed my desperation.

"Vincent said-"

"Vincent said not to sell," I interrupted, rolling my eyes and ignoring the urge to grab the bag and run. Instead, I tilted my head back and took another gulp of whiskey, hoping to calm my nerves. "But I pay more than anyone else. I'm willing to pay extra for what's in that backpack of yours."

I took another sip of whiskey, trying to steady my nerves. I couldn't let this opportunity slip away, but at the same time, I was terrified of what it would mean for me if I went through with it. I was torn between two conflicting desires, one to escape and the other to stay strong.

*What the fuck was I doing?* My thoughts were a jumbled mess as I tried to pull away from the dangerous path I was headed towards.

"I can't risk losing this job. Vincent said not to sell to you, so I won't."

“Fine, your loss,” I spat out, quickening my pace to get as far away from the drugs as possible. The anger inside me simmered. It was Vincent’s fault for dangling the forbidden fruit right in front of me.

He knew what I was like!

Would I have actually gone through with it if he had agreed?

“Apollo!” Yells came around while hands dragged me onto the dance floor.

I couldn’t resist as the crowd around me was a blur of bodies, all moving in perfect harmony to the beat. The music and sounds of laughter and shouting swirled around me, creating an exhilarated whirl. The people around me were just a sea of faces, but I didn’t care.

The bass pulsed through my body, and I felt it in my bones, making my feet move faster, and my heart beat harder. I was completely in the moment, completely free, completely alive. I let my head fall back, and my arms spread wide, completely giving in to the rhythm of the music.

“More!”

“Drink!”

“You gotta take this. This shit is good!”

The drinks kept coming, and I threw them back without a second thought, reveling in the fiery burn that spread through my veins.

I was Apollo fucking Moore, and nothing could bring me down.

“Police!”

Well, apart from that!

Just the shout alone caused the ripple effect of people scrambling to run. The crowd of party-goers scattered, each going their own way as the flashing of red and blue lights blasted through the front windows.

I fell off the dance floor, laughing hysterically while the familiar course of adrenaline ran through my body, making it burn hotter than the alcohol itself.

I stumbled and swayed to the beat and the loud call of sirens.

“Fucking neighbors! My dad’s are gonna kill me!” A voice came to my left, but my eyes were trained on Vincent’s lackey, who had completely frozen in fear on the side as he watched everyone else run around him.

A jolt shocked my dazed intoxication from me at seeing him there like a rabbit caught in headlights. It served as a harsh reminder of the reality of the situation.

He SO wasn’t cut out for this shit! I thought as I rushed over to him, trying to keep my body from swaying as I barged people out of the way.

“Give me the bag,” I ordered, holding my shaking hand out. “If I’m caught with it, I will get less time than you,” I explained.

“I’m going to jail!”

“JO!” I gave his face a slap hoping to knock some sense into him.

It worked as he blinked a few times before really looking at me.

“My name is JD!” He growled like that was the most important thing right now.

“Give me the shit before the police catch you with it!” I snarled and gave him a little shake.

My anger had come back, fucking ruining my night at the thought of this guy ending up in this situation he wasn’t cut out to be in.

*Where the fuck was Vincent!*

“Why would you help me?” he asked, confused.

“Do you want help or not?” I said, avoiding the question. No way was I going to make time to explain that if he got caught, he would most likely crumble and snitch on Vincent. Even if I had time, there was no way I would tell Samson’s new minion that secret.

Either fucking way, there was no way my circle member was going to jail if there was something I could do about it!!

“Come on, dude. You know what will happen if you get caught?”

“My family...” He whispered, going completely pale.

“Yeah, your fucking family,” I repeated, the urgency in my voice growing. “You won’t be able to support them if you’re locked up forever.”

“Oh fuck!” He palmed his head, looking even more scared than before.

“Just give me the damn bag,” I repeated, holding out my shaking hand. I watched with a mixture of fear and hesitation as he slowly handed it over.

“Good,” I snapped, throwing it over my shoulder. “Now, fucking move!” I grabbed him and yanked him towards the back door, barely avoiding falling as the world around us spun.

I was scared that if I let go of him, he would freeze again.

We burst through the back door and into the night air. I looked around frantically, trying to get my bearings. JO was breathing hard, and I could see the fear in his eyes. I let go of him and stepped back, trying to clear my head.

The bag in my hand felt hot, sending my body trembling as I could feel its weight. I could tell there was a lot by touch alone.

They wouldn’t notice a bag or two missing...

*Don’t look inside,* A sliver of my conscience whispered through the drunken haze. But I couldn’t stop myself, the need to see. To perhaps touch what I knew was inside.

I really needed to get rid of this before I did something I couldn’t stop. I shouldn’t have asked for it, but I couldn’t let the guy get caught with it, either.



Fucking Vincent!

“I’m going to hide this shit.” I jerked my head towards the few people still running. “Keep running that way.”

“But I can’t lose-”

“If you get caught with this, you’re fucked!” I shouted, “I’ll send Vincent a text telling him where he can find it.”

I could see the battle in his eyes, the fear of losing this job or getting to safety and not being arrested if he got caught.

“Thank you.” He whispered before taking off in the same direction as a few others going over the hedge fence.

I let out a sigh of relief as he disappeared into the night. The bag’s weight felt heavier as I stood there, unsure what to do next. The adrenaline was still pumping through my veins, and I could feel my heart beating hard in my chest. Even my own head was having a good time swimming in cotton balls.

I really wasn’t in the right headspace to do this efficiently.

But I’ve been in worse situations before!

Quickly running to the side of the house and dipping into one of the neighbor’s front lawns. They had giant rose bushes that looked like the perfect place. Placing the bag down inside one. I took a few steps back from it, my hands up like the object would spring to life and demand me to open it up.

I longed to peek, perhaps a small taste, just in case someone did find it. If what was inside was what I thought it was, then

whoever found it could be rich, that's if Samson didn't find out...

I slapped myself hard, grunting at the impact. The white heat of pain erupted just enough to get me the fuck out of here.

Fuck!

Looking back, I felt pride in myself for hiding the rucksack among the foliage. But now I had to get out of here unseen, and with the flashing of the red and blue lights surrounding the house, it would take a masterful display of skill to sneak my way out of this.

“Oi!” A gruff voice shouted from behind. A short order that could have been classed as a halt, but my head took it for *‘get the fuck out of here now!’*

It was a good thing I was a genius at this sort of thing. I was a fast guy on my feet, a quick-thinking escapist. I mean, I would have been if it wasn't for the curb moving under my feet.

“Shit!” I cried out as I hit the pavement, tumbling toward the concrete. The rough surface scraped against my skin, leaving bruises as I skidded along. The left side of my face throbbed in pain, sending a searing heat down my cheek.

I groaned, rolling onto my back, and gazed up at the twinkling stars, feeling dizzy as they swirled around me.

“Well, well.” A voice came from above me, along with a bright, sharp light, “Why am I not surprised to find you at the center of this, Apollo?”

“The spotlight loves me!” I smiled, blinking against the harsh light on my face. I was briefly blinded.

“I’m sure it does,” the voice chuckled. Then, slowly, the figure came into focus, and I realized who it was.

“Oh shit, Officer Cody, hey!”

He was one of the town’s familiar figures. A huge hit with the old women that loved to gawk at him while he was on patrol. They sure loved to guess who his circle members would be, along with a few longing gazes.

But who could resist a man in uniform?

He looked good in his crisp, navy-blue uniform and shiny badge pinned to his chest, reflecting the dim light. His belt was buckled tightly around his waist, with his thumbs hooked into it. His dark brown hair was always ruffled, giving him a carefree look, while the stubble on his chin and cheeks was neatly trimmed.

It wasn’t just his look that made people want him but his attitude also. Despite his rough exterior, Officer Cody was known to have a kind heart along with that, oozing confidence and authority.

Though he wasn’t a large man like his older brother, he was leaner but by the look of his growing muscle mass this past year. He most definitely would be making his circle call him daddy once he found them.

The rugged officer smiled down at me with a mischievous glint in his hazel eyes.

“What’s a handsome guy like you doing at a place like this?” Was I slurring too much? Surely not. My tongue did feel heavy in my mouth, though. Did I bite it when I fell?

The blurred image of Officer Cody frowned down at me, “I have no fucking idea what you’re saying.”

“You’re looking mighty fine, officer,” I said again, attempting to charm the shit out of him.

“Your charm isn’t going to work on me tonight.”

That’s what they all say!

“You took a bit of a tumble. You’re lucky your face didn’t get too roughed up.” He said, squatting down to get a better look at me.

I felt a prick in my right eye, making me groan as the heated pain erupted down my cheek.

Cody gave a hiss and tutted, “That’s going to be a shining beauty.”

I smirked, trying to hide the pain behind my words, “Thank you for noticing my good looks.” But my bravery was short-lived as another sharp jolt exploded from my eye.

The damn bastard had poked me again!

“You shouldn’t run from the law, Apollo.” Cody’s lecturing tone was all too familiar, and I couldn’t stop the sarcastic snort coming out of me.

“You really need to work on your catchphrases, officer.”

This wasn't the first time Cody had caught me doing something I shouldn't be doing. With every catch, he never lost his cool demeanor. Instead, he found a certain amusement in it, but his duty always resulted in me spending a night in the cells or having my dad pick me up.

I shouldn't have been surprised, given the rumors in town. Cody and I were two sides of the same coin once, wild party animals and adrenaline junkies. But on his eighteenth birthday, he shocked everyone by applying to become a police cadet and getting accepted almost immediately. Now, in his fourth year as a cop, rumors in town suggested he had his sights set on a higher position.

"Do you need medical attention?" he asked, trying to touch my face again, but I quickly dodged his hand.

"Nah, I'm good. A little fuzzy, but peachy," I paused as I thought about it, then burst out laughing, "I'm a fuzzy peach."

"What have you taken?" he asked sternly, suspicious of my behavior.

"Just lake water," I replied with a shrug.

There was a moment of silence as Cody seemed to weigh his options before finally giving in, "I'm not even going to ask."

"Think that for the best," I mumbled, debating if I could lay here on this pavement and sleep.

"I have to book you, I'm afraid." He gave a regretful sigh as he stood up to his full height.

“Sorry, all reservations have been filled,” I yawned, pulling myself into a fetal position.

Maybe I *could* sleep here tonight?

“Yeah, yeah, wise guy. Up you get,” Cody commanded gruffly as we both groaned, getting to our feet. But I had a whole lot of trouble staying upright.

“You got anything sharp on you that could cause me injury that isn’t your mouth?” he asked, his hands already frisking me down.

“My piercings?” I added with a smirk, feeling the typical heaviness that reminded me of the metal I was packing on my lip and brow. Those things are sharp. They could stab a fucker if they wanted to.

Cody snorted with laughter as I continued to feel his gloved hands glide over my clothes. It was mandatory for all people under the law to wear gloves while on duty.

Imagine finding your circle member while arresting them. I chuckled at the thought.

“You got something to say?” He asked with a raised brow. His hands were quick and efficient as he pulled out my phone and keys.

“You just want the excuse to feel me up,” I teased.

Even with the fuzzy sight, I could still see Cody’s smile spread across his face, “Never change, Apollo.”

“I want to,” I mumbled, the darkness of my mind threatening to take over as I remembered the pain I caused for everyone around me.

“Don’t,” Cody said seriously, his eyes locking onto mine, “Your kind of crazy is a fun one.”

I groaned as he pulled me upright, but my tired legs couldn’t handle the moving earth as we both started to walk toward the flashing lights. My feet ached with every step, and I felt like I was dragging a ton of weight behind me.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” I announced, feeling the alcohol churning in my stomach.

Thankfully, Cody realized I wasn’t joking and released me quickly, pulling me to the side so I could bring up the contents of my stomach. The acid burned my nose and eyes as I coughed and hacked. The burn of the alcohol I loved earlier was back with a vengeance, pushing back up and out of my mouth. I felt like I was going to die as my lungs burned and my stomach heaved.

“Now, this isn’t fun,” Cody mumbled disgustingly, but I was grateful he didn’t let me go. I was sure I would have face-planted in my vomit pile if he had.

After catching my breath, Cody’s strong arm wrapped around me as he gently guided me further down the road. The once lively party now felt like a grim wasteland as discarded garbage littered the front of the house, and the sound of music was replaced by an eerie silence.

“Fucking hell,” He muttered under his breath as I stumbled along, unable to keep my footing on the pavement. I clung onto Cody for dear life, grateful for his support as I struggled to stay upright.

“Has anyone offered you any illegal substance?” Cody asked, his tone stern as he led me toward his cruiser.

“Now, why would anyone do that?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Because we both know this town isn’t perfect,” He replied, his eyes scanning the surroundings before he looked down at me.

“Ahh Cody, didn’t your mama ever tell you nothing is perfect?” I laughed and instantly regretted it as my stomach protested at using any muscles in my entire body.

“Here, I thought you were perfect, Apollo.” He said with a smirk before opening the back door of his vehicle.

I scoffed as I stumbled into the back seat, grateful for the car’s support as I settled in. “Of course I am. But I wasn’t even born when your mama was teaching you all that life shit.”

“How about we forget this ever happened?” I asked, settling in the back of his car, taking the unopened water bottle, and gratefully downing a few sips.

“Okay.”

*Shit, it worked!*



“Only if you tell me where the drugs are?” His smile was now filled with a knowing smirk.

Even as the world spun around me, I knew the game Cody was playing. I couldn't help the laugh that escaped my throat, “There isn't any in this picture-perfect town.”

“Then I guess I'm taking you in,” He said, his tone half-teasing, half-serious.

Cody started the engine, the car rumbling beneath me. I leaned back, the cool leather of the back seat providing much needed comfort.

The night air wind from the open window felt good on my skin, cleansing away the smell of vomit, alcohol, and lake water that I knew I was giving off.

I took a sip of the water and let out a content sigh, grateful for the moment of peace.

Cody's eyes met mine in the rearview mirror, and I could see the questions in them.

“Disappointed?” I asked after a while as he drove me toward the center of the town. I instantly regretted asking, but I still felt for the cop. I couldn't help feeling bad for the only person trying to do what was right for this town.

Cody shrugged before giving out a long-tired sigh, “Can't help but try.”

“Yeah...” I trailed off, not wanting to add anything.

Cody was the officer on my case back when I got burned. Of course, they couldn't let go of a seventeen-year-old boy on the brink of death. An investigation had to be made, and Cody got my case. It was just a shame I couldn't give him what he wanted. It was also a shame he was a nosy ass bitch.

“Why the fuck were you at a party anyway?” I asked, frowning.

Cody only gave me a self-satisfied smirk.

“The neighbors complained, and you kids are so jumpy that all I have to do is turn on my lights and siren, and you all scatter like ants. Makes my job easier, but unfortunately for you, you got caught. I even gave you all enough time to leave before I got out of my car.”

“Lucky me,” I grumbled,

Cody gave an amused hum as he pulled into the town's precinct parking lot.

“You're going to have a rough hangover in the morning.”

“I'm immune to them by now,” I lied, even though I could already feel the sickness starting to build, my headache growing stronger with each passing moment, and the bright lights of the precinct seemed to pierce my eyes like lasers.

“Let me remind you again that drinking under the legal age is illegal. That's why it's called the legal age,” Cody added, and I couldn't help but let out a heavy yawn.

“Yeah, yeah.” waving him off.

The precinct was empty, which wasn't surprising. According to the town's folk, nothing ever happened in this peaceful small town.

"How's the leg?" Cody asked, helping me steady myself as he gently placed me down on the chair opposite his desk. He smirked as his dark eyes twinkled with mischief, "Peachy?"

I snorted, tilting my head back in amusement, "I wish." I closed my eyes and rested my head on his desk, feeling the nausea building again. I moaned softly as my head spun rapidly.

*I was going to be sick again.*

"Please aim for the trash can," Cody gestured to the small metal bin next to his desk, his tone playful but with a hint of concern.

"Okay," I groaned, feeling defeated.

"Alright. I'll call your dad to pick you up. I'm letting you off with a warning as it seems you will be suffering enough tonight, but I can't release you till I know you will be in good hands."

I chuckled weakly. "Can we go on a date first before seeing the parents?"

"Always the talker, Apollo." Cody's voice had a curve of amusement in his tone.

"My charms are a curse."

Cody gave a scoff and a chuckle, “Just don’t go telling your school friends that I’m easy.”

“Your secret is safe with me.”

“So are yours with me, Apollo.” he prodded.

*Yeah, not happening.*

I closed my eyes briefly, but Cody’s frustrated sigh jolted me awake, followed by his phone slamming onto the desk.

“Your dads aren’t answering, so it looks like you’ll be spending the night in a cell,” Cody said, his brow furrowed in concern. Despite his obvious care for my well-being, there was no way I was going to spend the night here.

Taking a deep breath, “I have another number you can call.”

Tonight was about to get a lot worse.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## GRACE

“I ‘m the worst person to have found my circle members!” I exclaimed, frustration seeping through my voice as I threw my hand up in the air. My anger was boiling, and I didn’t know how to contain it.

I haven’t been this angry before.

“You’re allowed to be angry, Grace,” Kristina’s soothing voice came from the other end of the line. Despite being ill for the past few days, she was making an effort to comfort me.

“But I think I hate Lucas’s family!” I whispered with a hiss, not wanting my own family to overhear. The thought of it left me feeling ashamed. “What kind of circle member am I when I feel like I can’t accept them?”

“Apollo’s family has always been that one family people avoid,” Kristina reminded me.

“Were they always like this? I mean, his sister, how can she be such a... a...” I struggled to find the right word to describe Lucas’s sister.

“A bitch?” Kristina offered with a hint of amusement in her voice.

“Yes!” I cried out, my anger finally reaching its breaking point. “The things she said about her own brother were just disgusting, and she said them right in front of me. Who knows what she says or does behind closed doors.”

“I’ve only met Laura a few times in town.” Kristina said, “You wouldn’t think she was that kind of person based on how she acts in public.”

“Well, she isn’t sunshine and daisies, that’s for sure,” I replied, anger still simmering within me. “She even asked if Lucas was paying me to lie about us being in a circle!”

“The whole town knows about Apollo and his family’s problems. When we were growing up, he tended to stay at other people’s houses or just camp out in the woods rather than be at home.”

“Why has nobody stepped in?” I asked, desperation creeping into my voice.

Kristina went silent, and even with the line between us, I could feel the weight of her wordless pause.

“What?” I pressed, needing an answer.

“People don’t like to be reminded that they could lose their circle members,” Kristina finally spoke. “Apollo’s family has always been *that* family, you know? The one people tend to just ignore.”

Her words hit me like a ton of bricks. The thought of anyone turning a blind eye because they couldn't handle a family's grief was just so frustrating. It broke my heart that nobody was willing to help.

"I don't know how to handle this," I admitted, my voice shaking with emotion.

"Lucas knows how to handle his family. Let him deal with it, Grace. You don't have to like them either." Kristina reassured me. "I sure wouldn't." She mumbled mainly to herself.

"I just don't know how he's able to live with it all." I mumbled.

"He's lived this long. He can handle himself."

*But could he? I wondered fearfully. What if he was lying helpless in a ditch somewhere?*

I tried to shake off the thought, but my body was already trembling with fear. Despite that, I felt Lucas's soul pulsing with anger, assuring me that he was still alive and well. He was doing something, but from the waves of frustration I was picking up, he wasn't happy about it.

"You still haven't heard from him?" Kristina asked, bringing me back to our conversation.

"No," I deflated, "I think I'm going to check the lake." Glancing at my window showed the night sky. I didn't really want to hike up that hill to the cliff edge this late at night, but I was getting desperate.

“If he’s not there, then I would recommend scouting parties around town.”

The sudden sound of my phone beeped, causing my gaze to dart down to the illuminated screen. My heart raced as I saw the message.

Vincent: **Seen him.**

That was it. No further information, no reassurance.

Nothing.

I fired off message after message, asking how, where, and when about Lucas, but I received nothing in return.

*He left me high and dry*, I thought with growing anger.

I sent my ball of burning rage at Vincent, only for it to ping off his barrier and for it to come back to me, turning my inner flames into a raging inferno.

“Asshole!” I seethed, my anger boiling over as I vented my frustration with a string of curses. It felt exhilarating to release my anger, but it did little to ease the knot of tension in my chest.

“Grace?” Kristina’s voice interrupted my thoughts, bringing me back to reality.

“Vincent has apparently seen Lucas.” I muttered sourly.

“That’s good! Where is he?”

“No clue,” I spat, anger still lacing my words. I hammered out another furious message to Vincent, letting him know just



how much of an asshole I thought he was for leaving me in the dark. “Looks like it’s his turn to go radio silent.”

“Both of them should be on your shit list.” Kristina stated, with a hint of amusement in her voice.

“Oh, they are!” I fumed.

If they thought for a moment that I wouldn’t be annoyed with their actions, they were sorely mistaken.

“Thanks for keeping me level-headed, Kristina,” I said, grateful for her support.

“It’s no problem. I’m just sorry for... Well, you know.” she replied with a sad tone.

“Stop,” I cut her off. “I’m getting over it.”

“Don’t just brush it off, Grace.” Kristina scolded, her motherly tone coming through.

“I’m not,” I sighed, “From what I’ve learned about my family, not forgiving someone only hurts everyone in the end.”

“But allowing yourself to feel angry and hurt is healthy,” Kristina reminded me. “Isn’t that what you’ve been trying to get Vincent and Apollo to understand?”

She got me there, but it was one thing saying it to others and another to do it yourself.

“I don’t want to be someone who wields the past like a weapon. I have seen it, Kristina, in my mother’s clients, who are wrapped up in the past, and they cannot let it go. Even my

own family experienced it, and they have just now started to get over it.”

The image of Laura made me shiver with a daunted loom.

*I refused to ever be like that.*

“Sometimes I feel like I’m being overdramatic. They are completely unaffected about being with other people. I feel like a child.”

Kristina burst out laughing, “Well, I can tell you for a fact that that isn’t true,” she said, still giggling.

“What do you mean? “I asked, confusion furrowing my brow.

“I’m assuming Vincent hasn’t told you, but for a month after that night, Vincent would give me the evil eye every time we were in the same room,” she explained. “Before, I thought it was because he thought I would spill the beans, but now I see it in a different light.”

I felt a weight lifted off my shoulders as Kristina spoke. I wasn’t the only one feeling the weight of the past. It gave me a sense of comfort to know that as much as he tried, Vincent had also been struggling.

“Are you worried about how your circle will react when they find out?” I asked, my voice filled with concern.

Kristina hesitated before responding, “Yeah, I’m a little worried about that.”

“Do you regret it?”

“I regret asking Apollo,” she answered, her voice filled with uncertainty. “But no...yes? I don’t know yet.”

“I’m getting mixed signals here.” I laughed it off, trying to lighten the mood.

“I did it for myself,” Kristina explained, her voice growing quieter. “I didn’t think about them. It was for me, to take control. At the time, it felt like the right choice, but now...” her voice trailed off, and I felt a sense of unease settle in my gut.

“Kristina? What is it?” I asked, my voice gentle and encouraging, but she seemed caught up in her own inner thoughts.

“Grace,” she started, her voice wavering with uncertainty. “You never wanted to find your circle, did you?”

Not expecting her question, I paused as I felt my cheeks flush with embarrassment. “I was scared,” I whispered, feeling the weight of my own fears.

“But that’s changed now?” she continued.

“Yeah.” I replied, trying to push aside the nagging feeling of unease. “Finding members of your circle opens you up in ways you can’t imagine. It doesn’t change you, but it offers new perspectives.” I was struggling. The bond flashed a wave of sickness in warning as I danced along the edge of revealing my circle’s personal connection.

“But what if you bond with someone who’s not right for you?” Kristina asked, her words heavy with worry. “What if

you end up connecting with someone dangerous? Like a murderer?”

Her questions caught me off guard, and I could sense that she was grappling with something dark and troubling.

My mind raced with questions, *where was all this coming from?*

“Kristina, are you okay?” I asked, feeling a sense of unease wash over me.

“Yeah, just ignore me,” she replied, trying to hide the distress in her voice with a weak laugh. “I’m just really exhausted,” she said, letting out a yawn.

“Okay,” I responded cautiously, not fully convinced. “But you know I’m here for you if you ever need to talk,” I offered, hoping to make her feel a little better.

“Thank you, Grace. Goodnight,” she said softly.

“Goodnight,” I replied before we ended the call.

Was the past haunting her and making her worry about her future with her circle? I couldn’t help but wonder what was going on in her life.

*Has she finally found her circle?* My thoughts were interrupted when my phone began to vibrate.

Looking down at my phone, I saw an unknown number calling me. I hesitantly answered.

“Grace?” a slurred voice, familiar and yet distant, greeted me. It was Lucas. The relief that washed over me was intense.

It felt like an eternity since I had heard his voice.

“Where have you been?” I asked, my voice shaking with worry and anger. My mind was awlirl with questions and concerns.

Like, why wasn’t he calling from his phone? And where was Vincent?

“I’m at the police station,” he replied, sounding defeated. The words hit me like a punch to the gut, and I felt a cold knot form in my stomach.

“You’re what?” I exclaimed, unable to believe what I was hearing.

He had gone missing for days and decided to show up now like this!

*What the hell has he been doing?*

“Shh!” he whispered with a strained voice. “Loud noise is painful.”

“Apollo! Give me the goddamn phone!” A new voice came on the line, deep and demanding.

There was a scuffle of curses and shouting on the other end before the line went quiet.

“Hello, this is Officer Cody. Who are you in relation to Apollo?” the new voice asked me.

“I’m Grace,” I replied, my voice small and trembling. “Lucas is part of my circle.”

My body kept flickering between hot and cold as I sat there trembling at the realization that I was speaking to an officer of the law.

“You have a circle member?” Officer Cody’s voice sounded distant as if he wasn’t talking to me at that moment. I could hear Lucas in the background, his drunken state making it hard for him to speak.

“My Guppy...” Were the only words recognizable.

“Uh-huh. I’m not going to ask what you’re into,” Officer Cody mumbled.

“I’m sorry?” I asked in alarm.

“Shit!” he cursed before his voice grew louder as he brought the phone back to his mouth. “I’m sorry!” he apologized, sounding flustered.

“It’s fine,” I whispered timidly.

Suddenly, Officer Cody’s voice boomed through the line, stern and commanding. “Use the bloody trash can!” he barked, making me jump in surprise.

Loud retching noises filled the line, and I could feel my own stomach turn at the sickening sounds.

“Grace, right?” he asked, his tone returning to a more professional one over the vile sounds that Lucas was making. “I don’t want to seem unprofessional to someone I haven’t properly met, but could you please come and take Lucas off my hands?” He continued, “He won’t be charged this time, but he will have to receive his second official warning.”

I was stunned, my mind struggling to process the situation.

“Okay,” I stammered, my eyes searching the room for a solution. “I’ll be there in five minutes?”

“Thank you,” Officer Cody sighed in relief. “Please hurry.”

And with that, the line went dead, leaving my mind whirling.

I quickly gathered my things and rushed out the door, my mind racing with a mix of concern and anger. I couldn’t believe that Lucas was in such a state that he had landed himself in the police station.

What was he thinking? My mind cursed out.

I could just imagine Vincent’s cool voice now, *‘He wasn’t thinking.’*

That was another thing! Where the hell was Vincent? Why did he allow Lucas to get this bad if he had eyes on him?

Cursing both of them, I stomped down the stairs.

I felt like I needed backup if I was going to pick Lucas up. I didn’t want to drive while handling his drunk ass.

“Where’s mom?” I asked hesitantly as I entered the living room where all of my dads were chilling watching the late evening news.

“She had an emergency call. She’s in her office and probably won’t be out until later tonight,” Papa replied, looking up from the pile of papers on his lap.

Well, crap, I have no choice.

“Is something the matter, Kiddo?” Da asked, obviously seeing the hesitation and worry on my face.

“Lucas is at the police station.” I blurted out.

The room fell silent as all four of my dad’s turned their attention to me. Father and Papa swore under their breath while Da burst out in laughter.

“A police officer called, asking me to pick him up,” I explained, my voice trembling with a mix of anxiety and frustration. My mind was grappling with the reality of Lucas’s behavior, the thought of him being locked up in a jail cell filling me with dread.

“Did he say anything about his dads picking him up?” Papa asked with concern etched on his face.

I shook my head, “The officer said we could pick him up, and he wouldn’t be charged. Lucas sounded very drunk.”

“That bloody boy!” Father growled, his anger boiling over as he stormed out of the living room.

“Remember what Brenda said, Tobias!” Daddy called, following after him with a note of desperation in his voice.

“Looks like we’re going to need a large pot of coffee for what’s to come,” Papa sighed, dumping his papers on the seat next to him and heaving himself up from the couch.

“Microwave some popcorn while you’re at it!” Da yelled, holding up the large empty popcorn bowl in the air as Papa passed by him.



Father's voice was filled with a mix of anger and frustration as he stormed back into the room, clutching the car keys tightly in his hand. His piercing eyes locked onto me, sending a bark of his command.

“Car, now.”

I stumbled after him in the foyer, my heart racing with nervous energy.

Daddy stepped forward, placing a hand on Tobias's shoulder. “Tobias,” he said in a concerned tone, his eyes filled with worry.

“I know, Rodger.” Father muttered, “But I won't allow him to continue on this path.”

“Do you want me to come?” Da asked as he leaned against the door frame. His amused face now turned into a serious look.

Father shook his head, a determined look in his eyes. “I'd like to think I'm a bit of an expert when it comes to this type of thing at this point.”

This answer brought a smile back to Da's face.

“Good luck,” he said with a playful salute before disappearing into the living room.

I turned to Father with a confused look, “Why would we need good luck?”

Father turned back to me, “He wasn't wishing *us* good luck.”

As we stepped out into the cool evening air, I couldn't help but feel a sense of dread in the pit of my stomach. I knew that this situation with Lucas was going to be a test of my father's patience and resolve.

But one thing I knew about my father was that he never backed down from a challenge.



The drive to the police station was tense and quiet. Father's steely gaze never wavered from the road ahead. I could feel the anger radiating from him, crackling in the air between us like static electricity. His fury for Lucas was concerning, but I trusted him. He was a force to be reckoned with, and he would stop at nothing to protect those he cared about.

I just hoped Lucas would see it that way.

As we pulled into the parking lot of the police station, my father's grip on the steering wheel tightened. The silence was deafening, and I could sense his anger radiating from him in waves. He was like a coiled spring, ready to unload on whoever stood in his way.

"Stay in the car, Grace." Father barked, unbuckling his seatbelt with a loud clank. Before I could say a word, he was out of the vehicle and storming towards the illuminated entrance, his steps heavy and purposeful.

It wasn't long before Father came out, herding a clumsy Lucas in front of him.

Father's face was twisted in rage as he held Lucas by the back of his loose shirt. Lucas stumbled down the steps, swaying from side to side, barely able to stay upright. The only thing keeping him up was Father.

Reaching for the car door, Father threw it open and roughly pushed Lucas into the back seat. Lucas groaned, collapsing onto the plush leather and rubbing his face with a grimace.

With the car light, I could now see the dried blood and scratches on his face and smell the pungent odor of alcohol on his breath.

*What had he been doing for the past couple of days?*

Father slammed his door shut and took the driver's seat, his hands white-knuckled on the wheel as he fixed Lucas with a glare in the rearview mirror.

"Sit up and put your seatbelt on," Father growled, his voice filled with barely contained rage as he fixed Lucas with a piercing glare in the rearview mirror.

Lucas moaned in protest, his whole body unsteady as he struggled to obey. Despite his drunken state, he finally managed to get the seatbelt across him.

It was then his eyes opened wider, and his ocean blues noticed me for the first time in the front passenger seat. The bond between us thrummed with familiarity, and I couldn't help but feel a flicker of happiness at seeing him. But I couldn't truly soak it all up. Looking at Lucas now, it was hard to see him like this.

Sensing my emotions, Lucas's happiness dimmed.

"You had the audacity to call my daughter to bail you out!" Father snapped after a while on the road. I guess his patience ran dry. His fingers wrung the leather wheel, glaring at the rear mirror as he drove.

"To be honest, I was hoping for Brenda." Lucas slurred, making me cringe at his blatant disrespect towards him.

"You are lucky the officer on duty let you off!" Father snapped, continuing his rant while his eyes flickered between the road and the rear mirror. "It is a criminal offense to drink underage! Do you even realize- are you listening to me?"

"Yeah, yeah." Lucas groaned before a thump turned my head. His head was now squashed against the window leaving grease marks on Father's car window.

Judging by the grimace on his face and his closed eyes, he was clearly not listening.

"Your fathers have obviously failed you." Father grumbled.

Lucas's eyes slowly opened, revealing a dark look.

"What did you say?" He demanded slowly with a force that could only be described as a brewing sea storm on the horizon. I felt Lucas's tumbling waves of fury that were about to crash onto the rocks.

"They failed you." Father's voice was harsh and unrelenting as he turned the car onto our private road.

My breathing faltered as I was about to witness what happens when an unstoppable force hits an immovable object.

“Don’t talk about my dads like that!” Lucas growled, the bond between us turned sharp like a thorn bush. It would prick anything that got too close. I could feel my skin prickle at the feeling.

“Why? They obviously can’t get through to you or haven’t tried.” Father retorted,

I didn’t know what my father was thinking.

“This has nothing to do with them,” Lucas said through gritted teeth.

“Really?” Father asked, his voice low and steady. “Is it all on you then? Are you taking responsibility for your actions?”

“Fuck you!” He leaped out of the car as soon as Father brought it to a stop.

“You can’t keep running, Lucas,” Father said once he stepped out with me following.

“I don’t want to hear this!” Lucas yelled, already storming off down our driveway.

“Well, who else will tell you when you mess up?” Father yelled back, not making any move to follow him. “Your mother?”

Lucas froze.

“Don’t you fucking talk about her!” Lucas growled, his voice filled with seething anger. He slowly turned towards

him, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he glared at father with an unwavering gaze.

“Why? Why can’t I talk about her?” father asked in a calm, inquisitive tone, tilting his head as if he were asking about the weather.

“Father,” I interjected, my voice filled with caution, unable to look away from Lucas.

I could feel the intense anger and fury bubbling inside of him, a boiling hot froth that churned my insides. It was a sickening feeling, a heat that I had never experienced before that caused my chest to grow painful.

“Do you ever wonder what she would say to you?” Father taunted, pushing Lucas’s buttons. “What would she say if she saw her youngest going down this path?”

Lucas’s response was a low, menacing whisper. “Shut. Up.”

“Father...” I spoke up again, needing to come between them. I needed to intervene to stop the anger from escalating further.

But no one was listening.

They didn’t even blink or look my way. I needed to warn my father. He was oblivious to the pain and turmoil that was consuming Lucas. It hurt so much that I couldn’t stop my hand from gripping my chest.

It hurts!

Lucas and I cried out as the fire rose, burning alive in Lucas's pain. Even my tears were scolding as they ran down my face.

*Please!* I wanted to scream, but even my breathing had turned ragged.

Despite my distress, Father continued to push forward, his steps drawing him closer to the trembling Lucas. "Do you think she wanted her boy to end up like this?"

"Stop it!" I shouted again, hoping to break this building tension around us and inside Lucas. I could feel it simmering like a volcano about to go off.

But Father carried on, stepping closer.

"Did her sacrifice come to this?" He yelled out.

"SHUT UP!" Apollo's voice bellowed around us before he launched at Father.

His fist was already sailing in the air towards him. My voice got caught in my throat as I prepared to shout to my father in warning, but he was already prepared for it.

The shock had locked my feet on the ground. I was desperate to break them up and stop this violence. But no one was listening. The two of them were locked in this brawl.

Lucas was fueled by his terrible rage. His fist came out again and again. A relentless fury towards my father, who managed to block and dodge them all.

I watched, stunned, as my father wrapped his arms around Lucas. Hugging him while restricting his arms.

I stood, witnessing the raw emotions overflowing from Lucas as he struggled against my father's embrace.

"I got you, Lucas." He muttered steadily.

"Shut up!" Lucas screamed, his voice hoarse from the sobs that wracked his body. He tried to break free from my father's hold, slapping him in frustration. "Shut up! Shut up!"

My heart ached as I watched the desperate outburst.

"Let it out, son," Father whispered, hugging Lucas close, rubbing his back softly in circles. "I know it hurts, but you need to let it all out."

"I fucking hate you!" Lucas sobbed, still trying to hit him, "Fuck you for saying shit! Fuck you with your perfect little house and family!" His sorrow and guilt were nearly too much to witness, to feel. It was painful. A full pain of fury and sadness.

"It's okay." Father continued to say, unaffected by what just occurred. He remained calm, continuing to offer comfort to Lucas.

"You don't know shit!" Lucas yelled, his head banging against my father's chest in desperation.

My heart ached to see each tear run down Lucas's face. But the sobs wracking his body felt like knives peeling at my skin. I just wanted to reach out and comfort him, to take away the pain that was consuming him.



I could feel his anger and frustration. Every word he spoke was like a physical blow. He was lashing out, but I knew deep down that the weight of his guilt and grief was driving him.

It was a struggle to watch, but I couldn't look away. I had to witness and feel his pain because his pain was my own like mine was his.

"They've been meeting." Lucas sobbed, slurring his words in a cross between hysteria and drunken fatigue, "Th-th-they don't want me." Lucas moaned out a scream that was filled with frustration. "I can't do anything right!"

"Hush now, It's okay," Father whispered, his arms still holding onto him. I suspected Father was the only thing keeping him up.

Lucas's sobs became less frequent with each passing moment, and his struggles less intense. The anger and frustration in his voice slowly dissipated, replaced by a sense of exhaustion and defeat.

Eventually, Lucas's sobs turned into sniffles before he finally willingly collapsed in his father's arms, his body shaking with sobs.

Father held him tight, whispering words of comfort and reassurance until Lucas's sobs turned into deep, exhausted breaths.

"Go inside. I got him." Father's voice was a soft whisper, a soothing breeze in the midst of Lucas's tempestuous storm. He

still cradled Lucas in his arms as he guided him through his breakdown.

I felt torn between my duty to stay by Lucas's side and my fear of doing more harm than good.

"It's okay," Father murmured softly, "Trust me."

The thought of leaving Lucas outside was like a physical ache in my chest. I should have been the one he opened up to as his circle member.

It felt like I was abandoning him. It felt wrong heading back inside. It felt wrong leaving Lucas outside. All of this felt wrong!

Looking out the front window, I watched Father kneeling on the ground while Lucas's arms clung to him desperately, like a drowning man grasping for a lifeline.

I could feel inside me that Lucas was soaking this comfort up, but the hate he felt for my father was concerning. He was soaking up Father's comfort, even as he hated himself for needing it.

"Go to bed, Grace," Da's voice startled me from my thoughts. He was leaning in the doorway, his face cast in the soft glow from the kitchen. "They'll be out there for a while. This isn't your father's first rodeo."

"Not his first?" I asked, not understanding.

Da gave me a sad smile as he walked up next to me, his eyes taking in the sight outside.

“When your mother and Tobias left, I turned to alcohol. I drank heavily. I was a mess, unbearable to be around. It was Tobias who pulled me out of that hole. His stubbornness is a force to be reckoned with.”

“You were...an alcoholic?” I whispered, my voice shaking as I tried to process this new information. Da’s head turned towards me, his eyes studying my reaction.

“I’m glad you never saw that side of me,” he said with a heavy sigh, his gaze returning to the front window where Father and Lucas were still kneeling, holding each other. “But I guess, in a way, you’re seeing it now.”

“Lucas isn’t an alcoholic.” I protested, but Da’s skeptical expression told me he wasn’t so sure.

“Isn’t he?” he said, raising a brow at me.

“He doesn’t drink every day.”

Da shook his head, “That’s the excuse I often used. But I learned that drinking every day or not doesn’t define it. It’s drinking to cope, drinking to escape.” He gave me a look, “Can you really say for sure he doesn’t rely on it?”

I was at a loss for words, unable to answer his question with certainty.

“Alcohol can bring out the worst in us,” Da continued, his eyes never leaving Father and Lucas as they held each other. “But with Tobias by his side, there’s no doubt in my mind that Lucas will find his way out of this.”

“But what do I do?” I asked, feeling helpless.

“Just continue to be yourself,” Da whispered, placing a comforting hand on my shoulder. “That’s all you can do.” Together, we watched Father and Lucas cling to each other, searching for comfort and offering support in each other’s embrace.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### LUCAS

*The dark figure was covered in the shadows. I could still see the crooked tilt of his wide smile, showing the bright whites of gleaming fangs. You know, that smile where you could tell how powerful they felt, unstoppable even.*

*And who would stop him? Not the three others that surrounded him.*

*Not anyone else in this town. They all believed in his sheep's clothing and his deceptive charm. It blinded them.*

*No one truly knew him like this.*

*I didn't, till now.*

*"How do you like it? Hmmm?" He asked like his voice was made of silk. It slithered over me like a snake, his words laced with poison.*

*Only a certain being could hold such a voice, a voice of power, of certainty.*

*The devil.*

*I was panicking. I could feel it as my heart beat to its own bass. My trembling had gone up a notch since they injected me.*

*“Come now, Apollo. I expected at least some courtesy of a review on my product.” He spoke while I hung here. Reveling in my helplessness.*

*My wrists felt strangled from blood loss, and my shoulders felt torn.*

*The devil sighed long and hard while I moaned from my spinning head. I felt so fucking good, but it was hard to be present. So easy and so tempting it was to fly.*

*A sharp pain erupted in my jaw, jolting me back to reality.*

*“Wake up and pay attention!” the devil shouted, his eyes blazing with red fury. I felt the warm trickle of blood down my chin, but the drugs numbed the pain.*

*My lip felt strange, thick, and hot, but there was no lasting ache. The smell of soap was long gone as the metallic smell washed over my sinuses.*

*“You are not the first crackhead to steal from me. But you are the first idiot to sell it on my turf and to add further insult to injury, you dare sell it cheaper!”*

*My heart was pounding like a drum, the thrill of the drugs and the fear of the devil making it difficult to think straight. “I’m no crackhead,” I panted, trying to hold on to my dignity.*

*My heart was running like I had just finished a marathon. I wanted to laugh. I wanted to cry. I wanted Vincent.*

*Perhaps if I wasn't as high, I could reason or, better yet, apologize. But whatever was in those needles was making me exhilarated regardless.*

*The devil only grinned wider, his eyes glinting with sadistic pleasure, "No," he whispered, reaching out and brushing my hair out of my eyes. A new look developed on his face, a type of sick adoration, "But you will be." He purred.*

*He turned to the other three, his face hardened, "Hit him again with a bigger dose," he commanded.*

I bolted upright in bed, gasping for air. My heart was pounding, and sweat clung to my skin, making me feel cold. I tried to calm myself, taking deep breaths, but my mind was racing.

In, out. In, out. Easy, calm. Easy, calm.

Fuck, it wasn't my week. Just under too much pressure, that was all. That had to be it!

With all that pressure, it was bound to squeeze out my past, my failures. The weight of it all was bound to make old memories rise to the surface, simmering when I buried them.

Rubbing my face, I felt the thick, salty wetness of sweat. It was on the edge of my tongue while a cold shiver ran through me.

It took me a moment for me to realize I wasn't in my own bed.

Beside me, Grace was sleeping soundly, her gentle snores a soothing lullaby in the silence. I was grateful I hadn't disturbed her with my sudden movement. But even the soft warmth of her presence couldn't ease the turmoil within me.

My thoughts were slow and sluggish, but they were enough to make me hyper-aware of my body's discomfort, from the dryness in my mouth to the cold sweat that refused to recede. Even my muscles ached, tormenting me along with the yawn that escaped out of my mouth.

It felt like I hadn't rested at all.



Flashes of earlier came back to me, bringing a flow of shame and guilt that did nothing to ease the churning in my stomach. I wish I had completely blacked out. That would have been better than remaining aware, allowing the memories of the past to haunt me.

I groaned and covered my face with a pillow, trying to block the piercing of my brain.

*Well, fuck me.* I thought bitterly to myself. *Fuck me sideways, long ways, and any fucking way!*

I could never show my face to Grace's family again.

Time seemed to stand still as I gazed at the clock on the wall. Every second ticking by felt like an eternity, and the minutes felt like hours. The clock struck two, and I couldn't bear to lie in bed any longer.

Getting up with a groan, I slightly swayed along with the room as it spun around me. The dizziness didn't help the churn in my stomach. Another reminder of what I had done only five hours before.

The smell coming off me was horrendous. Thick sweat and the lingering smell of puke clung to me. It really wasn't helping with my headache. My hair felt thick and heavy with grease too.

*Why the hell did they put me in bed with Grace like this?*

They should have placed me in a pigsty, but I'd bet even those fat bastards were cleaner than I was now.

With a shaking hand, I reached for the glass of water, the cool fluid a blessed relief on my dry throat. I swallowed a handful of pain relief pills, grateful for their presence on the bedside table. But as I set the glass down, my gaze was met with a haunting sight.

A photograph of a blonde-haired woman, smiling with lifeless eyes, stared back at me from the picture frame. I couldn't stomach looking at the still eyes or even her fixed-on, permanent smile from a past that I wasn't a part of.

The sight of the woman, who should have been familiar to me, made my heart skip a beat and my breathing still.

*'Do you ever wonder what she would say to you?'* Tobias had asked me, and the truth was, I did. I thought about it constantly.

I couldn't bear to look at her for another moment, so I turned the picture to face the wall.

I hoped Grace wouldn't notice this time and turn it back around again.

She never spoke of it, but she knew I always turned the picture. And every time, she would turn it back around for me to face again.

I couldn't stand looking at the stranger I should know.

*My mother.*

Unable to bear being in the bedroom any longer, I bolted for the door. My chest felt tight, like a vice grip crushing my

heart. I needed to escape, to find a gust of fresh air that would clear my mind and ease the burden of my emotions.

The house was deathly silent. The only sound was the delicate patter of my footsteps on the stairs. I felt like an intruder in a stranger's home, and how clean and new everything looked only added to the eerie atmosphere. The smooth and creak-free floorboards seemed almost too perfect, like walking on a cloud. The walls were straight and unmarred, without a single blemish or crack from fits of rage. The scent of the new carpet still lingered, but instead of providing comfort, it only added to the unfamiliarity of the place.

I felt too aware of every step I took like each one might break the fragile stillness of the house.

The backdoor was like a beacon, promising escape. Its smooth glide would allow me to slip out into the night without a sound.

But just as I reached the kitchen, a dim light caught my eye, casting a soft glow into the hallway and making me pause in my tracks.

“Can't sleep?” Brenda's voice was soft and gentle as I hesitantly peered into the kitchen.

She was already sitting at the breakfast table, her posture straight and alert, as though she had been waiting for me all along.

The only light source was the overhead bulb above the stove, casting a soft glow on the pot of milk simmering on the hob, brimming with the slow rise of steam that carried the comforting scent of warm milk throughout the large open room.

A part of me longed to escape, to hide from Brenda's piercing gaze. I was afraid she would see the broken pieces that I couldn't seem to fix. But another part of me yearned for her words, criticism, and thoughts.

I stood there, speechless, bracing myself for the barrage of questions I was certain would come. Tobias must have already told her about my assault towards him, along with my drunken breakdown.

Fuck, I haven't done that in so long...

Tobias really knew what buttons to press.

But Brenda didn't pry or ask questions. Instead, she simply tilted her head towards the saucepan on the stove and said, "When I can't sleep, I make hot chocolate. Help yourself."

"Sweet tooth?" I managed to quip, trying to ease the tension with a small joke.

If we were just going to make small talk, then I could deal.

Brenda merely shrugged, "It has flavonoids."

I sent her a confused look. I stepped towards the stove and poured myself a cup of hot chocolate. She gestured to the seat across from her, inviting me to join her. The warmth between

us began to grow like a comforting blanket on a cold winter night.

“It lowers blood pressure and helps you think,” she explained as she sipped her cup.

But I grimaced and placed my untouched cup back on the table.

“Not looking to think right now,” I said, my voice already heavy with the weight of my thoughts.

Brenda’s smile was understanding, “No?” she asked gently.

I looked away, regretting my decision to come down to the kitchen in the first place. I had willingly entered her domain and was now paying the price.

“Avoidance isn’t healthy, Lucas,” Brenda spoke softly, her words cutting through the silence.

“Who says I’m avoiding?” I asked, raising a brow.

If Brenda thought she could intimidate me, she was mistaken.

“No one,” she replied calmly. “But your actions speak volumes.”

“Spying on me?” I asked, a hint of a smirk on my lips.

Brenda chuckled, “Observing. You are quite fascinating to watch.”

I felt my body bristle at her observation, but I appreciated the honesty she was offering. One thing for sure about Brenda, she wasn’t a bullshitter, unlike me.

“Perhaps I don’t want to think more because if I do, I’d end up back in Grace’s room doing the devil’s dance with her,” I smirked, hoping for a reaction, a spark of anger or frustration.

But instead of anger and disgust, her smile only grew.

“Nothing you say, or do, will upset me, Lucas. How could it, when I have seen who you truly are with Grace? You might put up a front, but deep down, I know you care.” Her words were both a compliment and a criticism.

Disappointment surged through me. I had wanted anger, a fight, and the fireworks of emotion, to see this put-together woman unravel just by the power of my words. It was further proof that I was a broken mess. No one who was normal would want to see someone turn into their worst self.

I craved that chaos.

“You’re a textbook case of self-destruction, Mr. Moore,” Brenda said with a smirk that ignited a blazing inferno of anger within me. I could feel the walls closing in, Brenda’s observations were trapping me in a corner, but I wasn’t going to back down.

“Is that why you’ve been watching me? Looks to me like you are having your own troubles with avoidance. What’s the matter? Trouble in paradise with your own circle?” I snapped. My voice was as sharp as a knife.

I expected anger or some type of bitterness to glare at me from Brenda, but she just pulled her head back and laughed.

My hatred for this woman was turning into a venom I wasn't sure I liked.

“Ah, the classic, you think you see a weak point and attack. You've got to do better than that, Lucas,” she replied, still wearing a smug smile.

“You're the one who pointed out the weakness in your own circle, not me.” I countered.

“Reflecting, nice.” she mocked, her smile never wavering.

“How does it feel to know that you've ruined your only daughter's life?” I asked, watching as Brenda's smile faltered, and she took a slow, deep breath. She was trying to hide the anxiety that was visible just beneath the surface, but I saw it.

A thrill ran through me as I realized I'd hit a nerve, and a sick pleasure surged through me like a flood of endorphins.

I see you too, Brenda.

“How does it make you feel when the only time you feel normal is when others are suffering along with you?” She asked quietly.

A shot of electricity hit me, and my tongue felt thick at the roof of my mouth.

She didn't need to say more. The expression on her face spoke volumes about the pain and understanding she felt. It was louder than any words could.

*Checkmate.*

A heavy silence descended upon us as the weight of our words weighed heavily on our hearts. The insults and barbs we traded earlier had brought out our own insecurities and fears.

“I have something for you,” Brenda said softly, breaking the silence as she rose from her stool and made her way toward her office in the back of the house. I wasn’t sure if she wanted me to follow her, but she returned quickly, clutching a well-worn leather book.

“I’ve had this for a long time,” she said with a hint of nostalgia, her hand tracing the worn leather surface.

“Since I was your age, to be exact,” she said, her voice laced with emotion. “When I first saw you at the mall, I sorted through all of my old albums and made this for you.”

I sat there frozen, unable to take my eyes off the book in her hands. I knew what it contained, and the thought of it filled me with dread. I didn’t want anything to do with it.

“Susan was one of my best friends growing up. We wrote letters to each other even after I moved to the city. We stayed in touch until the very end,” she said with a sad smile, “I met you once before, at her funeral. You were just a tiny little thing. I was heavily pregnant with Grace at the time.”

She shook herself and quickly rubbed away one tear that escaped down her cheek. She took another deep breath and continued.

“Anyway, I had a lot of Susan’s things. I want you to have this.” She gestured to the album, “Inside are some letters I kept



and pictures of her at your age. You deserve to know about her, Lucas. You might be surprised by what you find.”

“What could I learn about the dead?”

“A lot.” She said with certainty, pushing the book closer to me before she got back up again and approached me.

I wanted to shrink away, but the stool wouldn't allow it, but I feared I would fall off if I leaned further. Brenda embraced me warmly, her arms wrapping around me like a soft cage. I felt her hand glide gently across my back in a loving motion.

*This fucking family and their hugs!*

My eyes burned with a threat to spill tears, and I couldn't bring myself to look at her as she stepped back.

A soft kiss was placed on my head, eliciting a wave of emotions I struggled to contain. I've taken punches and slaps to the face without flinching, but this simple act of affection left me trembling and on the brink of tears. I longed to cry out with a scream.

Brenda didn't comment on my state. Instead, she whispered, “Go get some sleep, Lucas. You'll feel better in the morning.”

I shut my eyes tightly. I felt exposed and raw, and my head was spiraling with a loss of dignity.

Brenda was gone when I opened my eyes, but the book she had given me remained. It taunted me with its presence. I didn't want it. I didn't want to know about her. She was dead. Nothing would change that.

Exhaustion consumed me, intensifying the headache from my hangover. I took a glass of water and headed upstairs, leaving the book and the thoughts of running away behind.

As I entered Grace's room, darkness embraced me, offering a moment of peace. But before I could close the door, Grace's soft voice called out to me.

"Lucas?" Her voice was filled with fear, piercing my heart. Her soul called for mine as I felt her wash over me, bringing her life light into my dark, dim world.

She pulled herself up from the bed, concerned, "Are you leaving?"

"No," I promised before raising the glass in my hand, "I went to get a drink of water."

"Are you okay?" Her green eyes were full of trust, life, and the most gut-wrenching of all, concern. I didn't deserve it.

"Yeah," I weakly smiled, brushing her hair out of her face as I settled beside her.

My need to ease her worry was driving me forward.

I had missed her so much.

"I know we need to talk," she whispered, stifling a yawn.

I gave a sad nod, "But that's for tomorrow."

I relished the feeling as she further snuggled into my arms.

"Tomorrow." She mumbled tiredly. "I missed you."

"I missed you too, Guppy," I whispered.

For just one more night, I could pretend that everything was okay.



The sound of the horn blasted through my ear, ringing with a brutal force that jolted me out of my slumber. I stumbled, falling out of bed with a curse. The quilt tangled around my legs, adding insult to injury as I ended up in a crumpled heap on the floor.

“I’m glad to see you’re up, Lucas,” Tobias’ voice dripped with sarcasm, slicing through my already pounding headache. The last thing I wanted to hear in the morning was his smooth, unfazed tone.

Not to mention, I was still recovering from a night of heavy drinking.

“What the fuck!” I yelled, struggling to free myself from the tangled covers. My frustration mounted with each passing moment, making me want to hurl pillows across the room.

The loud horn went off again, sounding like a sharp knife plunging into my skull.

“I’m going to shove that horn right up your ass if you blow it again!” I spat out, openly glaring at him.

“Get dressed. We are going on a run.” He ordered, dropping a pile of clothes next to me.

He has to be joking.

“I’m too ill. I can’t run.” No way in hell was I running with this headache. The thought of running was enough to make me want to hurl.

“I didn’t know a hangover was a recognized illness.”

“It is in Germany,” I grumbled.

“I’m sorry to inform you, Lucas, but we are not in Germany. So, get dressed and meet me in the foyer in six minutes.” Tobias commanded, his tone leaving no room for argument.

But I could be a stubborn bastard also.

“I’m not running,” I said stubbornly.

“Oh?” Tobias gives me a sardonic smile as if he’s enjoying this game of cat and mouse. “If that’s so, then I have no issue spending all day with you. I am a great conversationalist, after all. But I’m afraid I can get quite lonely, and if you fall asleep, I may have to press my horn.”

“You’re a monster,” I whispered in disbelief.

Tobias leaned downwards towards me, “What will it be, Lucas? An hour run in silence or a long day with me glued to your side?” He was so relishing the power dynamic between us.

“Run.” Most definitely run.

“That’s what I thought,” Tobias said, his smile turning victorious. “Get dressed. Meet me in the foyer in four minutes.”

“I need to shower first!”

“You had no problem smelling like this last night. Another hour won’t hurt you.” He looked back at his watch, “You now have three minutes. If you’re not in the foyer by then, I will assume you do not wish to run but prefer to spend all day with me instead.”

With a flourish, Tobias turned and strode away, leaving me bewildered and disoriented on the floor.

Thank fuck that Tobias didn’t bring up the events of the previous night, but the thought of spending another grueling hour running with him was nearly unbearable.

“I got you some pills,” Grace’s sweet voice pulled me out of my thoughts.

I could get used to seeing her every morning...

I gratefully accepted the pills and swallowed them dry, hoping they would ease the pounding headache that was threatening to split my skull in two.

“Your dad is making me run at this ungodly hour,” I grumbled, putting a large gray shirt over my head that had to be Graham’s.

Grace gave me a sympathetic smile. “It’s his way of caring. It’s what his family did with him.”

“If this is him caring, then I don’t want to know how he shows love,” I muttered sourly.

“Lucas! Get your ass moving!” Tobias shouted from down the hall. “One minute left!”

In a moment of desperation, I turned to Grace and begged, “I give you permission to break my knees. I won’t feel it on this one, so you don’t have to feel bad.” I said, tapping my scarred leg.

Grace let out a soft giggle before leaning in and placing a gentle kiss on my cheek. I swear my headache eased slightly with just that alone. I sighed in relief.

“Go run, and we can talk when you get back,” she said, sending me off with a warm, encouraging smile.

“You had twenty-four seconds left,” Tobias said as I descended the stairs and into the front foyer.

“I thought there was going to be silence?” I huffed, crossing my arms and preparing for a rant I knew was building.

“There will be. Come on.” He went out the front door.

The cold morning air felt like a shock to my system as I stepped outside, each breath making me feel more alive. I knew this run was going to be brutal.

“We will be running along the road that goes around our house. If you keep a decent pace, it will take an hour.” Tobias explained before he started to run, most likely expecting me to follow.

Tobias was already several feet ahead, his brisk pace a silent challenge for me to keep up. I took a deep breath, feeling the residual heat from the party still burning in my veins, and started my run.

My legs felt heavy, my head pounding, but I pushed through. With each step, I felt a surge of adrenaline, a surge of determination.

But as the minutes passed, my thoughts started to wander. My pounding footsteps echoed in my head, reminding me of the reckless night before. I couldn't help but feel on edge, not understanding why Tobias hadn't mentioned a thing about it.

Regardless of what had happened the night before, at this moment, right now, we were just two guys pushing through a morning run together.

The road ahead of me felt never-ending, but I pushed on, determined to finish this run. And then, suddenly, Tobias slowed to a stop as we made it up the hill where his house was.

I leaned over at my stomach, while my lungs demanded air. My chest rose and fell with each ragged breath I took. Sweat dripped down my face, my clothes were soaked through,

Tobias looked at me, his breath coming out in visible clouds showing his own pants for air, "Good job, Lucas," he said, his voice a low rumble.

I blinked while a surge of delight at his praise bloomed inside me. Those words, simple as they were, filled me with pride.

"Though I'm quite confused, you look in peak physical shape, but yet you're panting like an overweight dog that hasn't been on a run its entire life."

That was oddly specific.

“Good genes?” I shrugged, still trying to catch my breath.

“Shower up and meet us back in the kitchen for breakfast,” Tobias ordered before promptly leaving like he expected me to follow his order.

I was going to do it regardless.

I wasn't doing it for him.

I stank to high heavens and was hungry like fuck.

I felt like a shower virgin when the hot water hit my skin. I was brought to a state of pure bliss. The heat soothed my aching muscles, easing the pains from the past few grueling days. I moaned in pleasure, unable to contain the ecstasy coursing through me.

Stepping out of the shower, I felt reborn, but the sight of my reflection in the mirror brought me crashing back to reality. My face was marred by cuts and bruises. I grimaced at the scratches on the left side of my face. The memory of me eating asphalt wasn't a pleasant one.

The bag!

My whole body pulsed in shock, taking my breath away.

I had completely forgotten about it, and the sudden shock of remembering made my heart race with terror. It felt like a vise around my chest, squeezing tighter and tighter until I felt suffocated. I was paralyzed with fear, unable to shake the dread that had taken hold of me.



I should message Vincent and tell him where it was, I thought as I came out of the bathroom in borrowed clothes from Grace's dads.

Then I noticed her sitting on her bed, waiting for me.

Grace approached me with a warm smile, her eyes shining with kindness. "Did you have a good run?" she asked, breaking through the awkward silence.

"Yeah..." I replied, feeling a knot form in my stomach as I realized that this conversation was inevitable.

"Grace, I-" I started, but she cut me off.

"I'm sorry, Lucas," she said, and I could see the remorse etched on her face.

Despite the guilt weighing heavily on me, I tried to keep my expression neutral.

"No, Grace. You have nothing to be sorry for. I'm the one who made you say what you said, and I should have told you sooner about Kristina, but..."

"You were scared," she stated, and I felt myself nodding, unable to deny the truth.

"Scared that we would leave you," she added as if she could sense my thoughts. I didn't have to say anything for her to know that she was right.

"Vincent told me about your...your dad," she said hesitantly.

“He isn’t my dad.” I instantly regretted my outburst, but the damage was done. “I’m sorry,”

I forced my body to relax. We needed to air it all out, and Grace was trying to understand and help.

I needed to get over myself and my daddy issues.

“I know you’ve said some things before, but Vincent...well, he made it more real. He told me a few more things,” Grace continued, her tone gentle and understanding.

“I’m glad he did,” I said honestly. I could never really talk about the things I grew up with out loud. Vincent is observant, and I wasn’t surprised when he confronted me one day to ask me all about it.

“Growing up in that house was a far cry from a normal family. I learned early on that I had to fend for myself,” I confessed, the weight of the past pressing on my chest.

Flashbacks of visiting Kristina’s family, a loving and tight-knit unit, only intensified my feelings of emptiness and abandonment. “My dads were there, but they weren’t there. They are just these hollow people that are just waiting to die.”

I sighed as the pressure on my shoulders forced me to lower them. “My family is broken, Grace. It just makes sense that I was raised to be also.”

“You are not broken, Lucas.” She said firmly, her hand gripping my own as she poured her certainty into me. She truly believed I wasn’t.

“It was my fault Beau left. I heard him talking to my dads, complaining about how he couldn’t stand the sight of me when I was younger. Him leaving without a backward glance made me realize that a circle can leave each other.”

But now, the thought of my dads betraying me by secretly seeing Beau behind my back added to my confusion and insecurity. I was questioning everything. How long had my dads’ been seeing Beau behind my back?

“But you’re his son.”

“I’m his circle’s son, not his biological one,” I corrected her.

“I see no difference,” she said stubbornly.

I couldn’t stop the chuckle from escaping. This was one of the reasons why I loved her.

“I love you,” I said, unable to keep the words inside any longer.

Grace’s face went slack with surprise, her cheeks flushing a deep red at my confession.

I could feel my heart racing as Grace looked at me with her eyes lit up and a warm smile. However, the words that came out of her mouth next took my breath away.

“I love you too, Lucas,” she said softly, her voice full of emotion.

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing, and yet, it felt like the most natural thing in the world. Our bond hummed with

pleasure. It twinkled and shimmered but yet burned like the stars themselves.

The place in my chest where Grace's soul resided danced. It was precious. It needed my love and protection, and I couldn't help but feel grateful for the connection we shared even more.

A tear of happiness dropped from Grace's eye before her hand curled into a fist and punched me in the arm.

"Hey!" I yelled, grabbing my arm where she had struck me. Our bond rippled with a wave of nausea, punishing Grace for her attack.

"Never leave like that again!" she hissed, her voice full of anger and frustration. "You stupid man!"

I leaned into her embrace, allowing her to wrap her arms around me. I felt the full weight of the emotions she had experienced while I was gone: the longing, the guilt, the fear.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, my voice thick with emotion.

"I wish I could strangle you!" she cried, clinging to me tighter.

"I'm sorry," I repeated, feeling helpless and ashamed for causing her so much pain.

"I went to your house," She sniffled, rubbing at her watery eyes, "I saw what your sister is like."

I cursed under my breath and held her head in my hands, forcing her to look at me, "You never listen to her, okay? Whatever she had said, you can't let her get to you."

If I could force my will into her now, I would have. I never wanted Grace to touch that toxicity that was my sister. Grace was too nice for the likes of her.

“I don’t think I like her.” She whispered, her cheeks in a fierce shade of red from embarrassment and shame. But she had nothing to feel bad about.

“I don’t like her either. But you don’t have to be close to her ever again.” I would make damn sure of it, also.

“I don’t want you to be close to her either. You’re much more than what she says.”

I brought Grace to me again, hugging her, hoping her pain would soak into my bones. It felt like the same pain I had when I finally realized my sister would forever hate me.

“You’re much more than what anyone says!”

I couldn’t lie. My heart broke a little bit more as Grace sobbed into my chest.



“Do you ever dream of our future?” Grace whispered sleepily as we both settled down for the night.

We hadn’t left each other’s side since she cried in my arms. My heart felt heavy from the weight of my guilt. I had promised Grace I would always be there for her, but I failed her once again.

The thought of her tears from earlier was a show of the heartache she had suffered from my absence. It just made me

feel like the worst person in the world.

Our bond hummed with a mixture of regret and love as I held her close, feeling the softness of her skin and the beating of her heart.

I'd meant to talk to her, but then the situation with my dad pulled me to a place that I wasn't even sure I was back from yet.

I traced my fingers up and down her arm, feeling the velvety softness of her skin. "All the time," I whispered back into the quiet darkness of the room.

I imagined a future where we lived in our own home, surrounded by laughter, love, and the simple joys of everyday life. The thought of sitting down to dinner together, watching a movie, or planning a week's worth of shopping made my heart race with excitement.

"Where do you see us?" Grace asked, curiosity lacing her words. Despite growing up without sleepovers, she seemed to know just what pillow talk was.

"At our home," I answered seriously, the image of our future home as clear as day. I longed for the simple moments of our lives, like shared meals, movie nights, and grocery shopping.

Grace entwined her leg with mine, clinging closer to me. "Not going on adventures? No bungee jumping or rock climbing without a harness?"

I could hear the grin in her voice.

A smile spread across my face as an image came to mind.

“Maybe I’ll push Vincent out of a plane at some point,” I said, and her soft giggles filled me with happiness. They were like music to my ears, a soothing balm to all my soul pieces, wherever they may be.

“I dream of us, you, me, Vincent, and the other two we haven’t found yet,” I said with a smile. “I see Vincent in the kitchen, grumbling in a frilly apron with his arms crossed, probably complaining like the asshole he is. I see you just smiling, that type of smile where it hurts your cheeks because you’ve been laughing too much.”

“And the other two?” she asked with curiosity.

“They change a lot, but today one is a tech billionaire,” I chuckled, feeling her chest bounce with suppressed laughter. “And the other, a fireman.”

Grace raised a skeptical eyebrow, “A fireman?”

“Yes,” I replied, my tone slightly mocked defensively, “This is my dream, and if I want a fireman, then I will have one.”

Her laughter filled the room, enveloping us in a warm embrace.

But then, the image of the hidden bag came to mind, and my mouth suddenly watered with desire.

Shit.

“Lucas?” Grace whispered, sensing my change in mood.

“Yeah?” I held her tighter, hoping to suppress the urge to go retrieve the bag.

“What will you be doing?” She asked softly, sleep was slowly taking her, and I just hoped she dreamed what I pictured.

“I want to be the one to make everyone’s dreams come true. That would be an incredible power, wouldn’t it?” I mumbled, inhaling her sweet scent.

Grace hummed contentedly against my chest, her nose nuzzling against my skin, and I gazed down at her to see a peaceful smile playing on her lips.

As I held her close, I felt a sense of calm wash over me. Our bond went into a tranquil state as she finally fell asleep. I wanted to absorb her, listening to her soft breathing and feeling how she fit perfectly in my arms.

But as the minutes passed, the image of the bag haunted me. The bag filled with my temptation, the thing that could satisfy my cravings.

I tore myself away from Grace, unable to resist the pull of it any longer. My body was already slick with sweat at the thought of what could be inside. The need to know consumed me, to see if it truly was what I believed it to be.

I glanced over at Grace, sleeping so peacefully, and I considered waking her. The urge to ask for her help was strong, but I pushed it down. I couldn’t burden her with my



problems, not when she already carried the weight of her own struggles.

She could leave you.

That dark voice spoke, lapping up my fear as it swallowed me whole. Forcing my legs to back up, away from her.

She couldn't leave me. She just couldn't.

My body trembled as I paced the room, searching for anything to distract me from my own personal hell. I needed to do something, anything, to take my mind off the fucking bag.

And then it hit me.

I had to get it for Vincent!

I quickly made my way to the foyer, snatching Grace's keys from the side table without a second thought. She wouldn't even notice I was gone, and I could return the truck before she woke up.

I had to get the bag. If those drugs were found by the wrong person, it could lead back to Vincent. I had to act fast before it was too late.

Someone might have found it already!

It was best to check.

I drove, the streets blurring by in a rush. My thoughts were a tornado of emotions. But the pull of the bag was too strong, and I found myself unable to resist. I had to see for myself what was inside.

I pulled up outside the house, and the rose bush was all in my sight.

I stepped out of the truck and approached the bush. Right at the center, the bag was still hidden by the shrubbery. It didn't even look like it was touched. No one had found it.

My heart raced with anticipation, and I felt a bead of sweat trickle down my forehead. I was overcome with the fear of the unknown and the anticipation of what I was about to uncover. I hesitated for a moment, my hand hovering over the bag, but my inner demons urged me on.

I finally made a grab for it, my fingers wrapping around the rough material. I lifted it from its hiding place and held it tightly, my heart pounding. The weight of the bag seemed to mirror the weight of my addiction. I stood there for a moment, taking deep breaths and trying to steady my nerves.

I was consumed by the need to know what was inside, to see if it would feed my cravings and offer me a temporary escape. But I also feared what might happen if I gave in to my addiction.

With a shaking hand, I unzipped the bag and peered inside.

*What are you doing!* I asked myself, but I had the urge to see if it was still there.

*Don't look inside!*

But I needed to know if it was what I thought it was. I longed to look inside. I had to know.

*Don't do it!*

***Just a peak, It won't hurt.***

My mouth instantly went dry as my eyes drank in the many bags of white power.

There had to be over twenty small white bags, each filled with the fluffy delight of cocaine.

My heart raced, and I felt it pounding.

How long has it been since I had some?

*You promised.*

With a gasp, I stumbled back to my car, unable to let go of the bag as I drove back to Grace's house.

The quiet as I entered back into Grace's bedroom again. It looked like she hadn't even stirred during my absence. But despite the peaceful surroundings, my mind was anything but calm. The thoughts of giving in to my addiction kept creeping up, tempting me to take a small taste.

***You know you will. Might as well do it now.***

*Fuck no*, I thought, pacing out a huff to the window.

I despised myself for bringing the bag to Grace's house. The nights were growing darker with each passing day, and even the open fields around Grace's house couldn't bring me peace. The only thing I could think about was the bag filled with my ultimate temptation, tucked away in the corner.

Letting out a shaky breath, I thought about what I had said to Grace at the party.

*'I don't need to look for an escape while I have you by my side.'*

I was a liar. The words I had said to her were false.

I didn't want them to be. I believed what I said was true at the time. But as the days ticked by, the cravings were getting worse.

*What was wrong with me!* I thought, gripping my hair, pulling to give me relief.

***It wasn't your fault you ended up liking it.***

That dark, reasonable thought spoke. It felt like dark chocolate, so rich that it was inevitable to sweet-talk me eventually. It knew the right words to say. To fight it felt like an impossible task. It was me, my other side, that wanted to drown. It was willing to become numb. It longed to suffocate the pain around me.

My breathing felt heavy. Panting in full panic, I wasn't in control as I dived into the bag, reaching down to the bottom where it hid the small bag full of white powder.

Just holding it instantly made the panic go. The craving for it was overwhelming. I was holding it, so I might as well take a rail.

***Yes!***

*No!* I shouted to myself, but my legs took over as they stumbled into Grace's bathroom. Locking the door, my hands shook as I opened the bag, pouring it out of the countertop.

The damp fluffy powder easily crumbled into a line after I used my credit card to straighten it along with a scrape.

*Just one.*

The rail was thick, ready, and coaxing for me.

*Was I really going to do this?* I wondered, looking down at the white powder and the bill in my hand. I didn't even remember rolling it. It felt wrong to do this here, in a place that was supposed to be safe. My mind felt split in two, with one part urging me to take the hit and the other feeling disgusted.

*When did it become this hard to decide?*

*At least it's not heroin!*

Leaning over the sink, I looked up at the mirror, hating what I saw. I was trembling, sweaty, pale, and messy.

My mouth was extremely dry, and the world around me was too slow.

*Look at you. What circle member would want you around looking like a depressed fucker!*

I was Lucas Apollo Moore, the party enthusiast who brought the fun. People liked me because of that. Grace liked me before she knew we were part of a circle. She liked that I was happy and fun, not like this...

*They will leave if you keep this depressing shit up!*

As much as you were connected to a circle, I knew for a fact they could leave.

I've seen it. I had seen a circle leave each other without a backward glance. It changed everything. The fantasy of circle members loving you regardless of anything had changed. They could leave and never look back. The thought was terrifying.

*I never want to be alone again...*

***You need a little boost of happiness. Only this once...***

I couldn't stop my head from bending over the counter along with the rolled-up paper, snorting up the line.

"Fuck." I groaned with relief as I felt the hit run through me, numbing my sinuses as it went. I felt the drip hit the back of my throat, easing every tension I'd ever felt from me. The high was like a rush of fresh air filling my lungs. It cleared me of the toxic atmosphere that had been suffocating me.

I could feel my heart pounding against my ribcage and the tingles spreading across my face, leaving me buzzing with adrenaline.

I groaned in bliss again, resting my head on the countertop. A broad smile spread across my face, and I couldn't help but feel proud of myself for taking this moment of escape. I needed this hit so badly, and now I was finally able to relax.

This was so much better than drinking.

As I gazed into the mirror, I saw the reflection of a man filled with confidence, the broken, uncertain version of myself now long gone. This hit was exactly what I needed.

"Lucas?" Grace's soft voice came from the other side of the bathroom door, accompanied by a light knock. "Are you okay

in there?”

“Yeah, just a sec!” I replied, quickly tidying up the evidence of my indulgence. I hastily rubbed the leftover powder over my gums, relishing the numbing sensation in my mouth and teeth.

*It was our little secret.*

Grace wouldn't understand.

I stepped out of the bathroom with a deep breath, feeling invigorated and ready to tackle the day ahead.

“Lucas, your nose is bleeding.” Grace's voice was filled with worry as I came out.

“Ah, shit.” I tried to cup my nose to stop the flow, but the crimson liquid continued pouring out, filling my mouth with the bitter taste of iron.

Grace watched as the droplets fell from my nose onto the floor.

“Are you okay?” she asked cautiously, her eyes never leaving mine.

I smiled, feeling the rush of adrenaline coursing through my veins. “Yeah, why wouldn't I be? It's a new day, Guppy! And I feel amazing. Let's go kick Vincent's ass at school. You and me, forever.” I laughed, already heading towards the closet to get ready.

Grace just looked at me, her eyes wide with confusion. “Lucas, it's the middle of the night. There's no school today.”

Her words barely registered as I reached for her, my hands excitedly shaking. But as soon as I touched her, she flinched, pulling away.

Her concern only made me feel irritable.

Couldn't she see that I was happy?

I stepped closer to her, but her sudden jump at our contact only made things worse.

“The bond feels strange between us, Lucas,” Grace spoke softly into my chest, her grip on my shirt tightened like she wanted us to become one again. “It feels so out of control, and it's making me worried. Like you're really excited but....”

“Just a little bit of the trembles. Nothing to worry about, Guppy. You don't have to worry about me, okay? I'm good. You're good. We are all good. The only thing you should worry about is Vincent, and with my help, you won't have to worry about anything soon. Yes?” I spoke with a rush, my words tumbling out at lightning speed. The metallic taste of blood still lingered at the back of my throat, a reminder of the nosebleed. But the thrumming beat of my heart and the rush of adrenaline made me feel alive.

“Lucas, I don't like it.” She whispered, “It feels odd. It's never done this before. It's like it's erratic?”

**You did this for her. Perhaps you need another line just to be sure it's working.**

The drip was still running at the back of my throat, making me taste the bitter tartness.



I could do anything. I felt the fierce beating of my heart. I was trembling with adrenaline.

God, I could go for a run!

Then I remembered Grace was still looking at me oddly.

“Hey, it’s okay.” I tried to say soothingly as I reached for her again, “I’m just having a bit of the jitters, you know. Nothing to worry about.”

“You promise?” she asked, looking up at me with pleading eyes.

“I promise.”

It was just a shame that I’d lied.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## GRACE

I was on edge all day, ever since I woke up to Lucas experiencing something I had never felt before. My whole body and nerves were frayed from the surge of frizzled tremors. I was just thankful that they calmed down after twenty minutes and then completely vanished, but whatever it was had done something to Lucas.

Since then, the bond had dramatically calmed, and Lucas had become physically and emotionally distant. It was the opposite of what he was like when I woke up late in the night, hearing him groaning in the bathroom.

When I knocked on the door, I didn't expect the person to come out to be Apollo, the party animal who was so full of life.

He was ecstatic, manic, and filled with excitement that was too much for me to handle first thing in the morning. At first, I thought he was happy. He was the Apollo I had seen before at my first party: the happy-go-lucky guy who wanted to dance and let loose.

His erratic motions and speech were concerning, along with his rapid heartbeat and shaky body. He just couldn't stand still, and his constant, rapid speech was close to frightening. His need to continuously reassure me was close to an obsession from him.

I tried to read our bond to sense what was wrong, but it was like catching smoke; his emotions were chaotic and fake. They were covering that shadow, which was dark, and not even the sparkles of artificial lights could keep it at bay.

Once the small fireworks went out, Lucas plummeted down with a crash. I felt it tumbling through the bond, the downward spiral that he was trying to hide. He couldn't hide it unless he wanted to block the bond fully, so I felt the burning of all the negative emotions running through him at that moment.

It felt like his mind was wandering, and his body was frozen before being consumed by a deep longing. I didn't know what he was searching for, but I could feel his desperate yearning. I was scared, not knowing what had changed last night. Had our conversation about his dreams triggered something?

Either way, it scared me.

I watched over him all night, waiting for the bond to act up again. Because that was the only reasonable explanation.

I knew the bond between Vincent and us could act up from him blocking us. It was making our bond become unstable and fractured. I didn't know it could also affect mine and Lucas's connection. I thought at least our bond was safe.

I watched him from the corner of my eyes, sitting on the window ledge seat, staring out the window, and appearing far more interested in his surroundings than talking to me. I could sense the smoke smothering him from within, clinging to him with each ragged breath, even igniting my lungs with its hot embers. I was sure it was only a fraction of what he was feeling.

*I'm here! Tell me what is wrong,* my mind screamed at him, begging him to turn to face me. But instead, he looked down at his lap, fingers intertwined. I couldn't resist sending a calming wave to him. The need to comfort him was overwhelming.

However, I winced when Lucas jolted, his head snapping towards me with wide eyes. His pale face glistened with sweat, and his throat bobbed as he swallowed tightly. Our bond dimmed as he drew in on himself, turning back towards the window as the suffocating smoke grew.

The smoke tasted of guilt, regret, and self-hatred, a stark contrast to the manic excitement from earlier.

"Are you okay?" I asked, trying to pull him away from the thoughts that were currently drowning him.

"Hm?" His head shot up, his blue eyes locking onto mine with a flicker of surprise. The silence that had enveloped him was broken by the sound of him inhaling deeply, filling his lungs with air.

"I asked if you're okay," I repeated, desperation creeping into my voice. I needed him to hold on, to trust me.

“Yeah,” he breathed out, the word tinged with the bitter taste of a lie. His throat constricted with each swallow, and his hand absently ran through his tousled blonde hair. The charming smile he offered me didn’t reach his eyes. “I was just thinking about Vincent.”

I rose to my feet, walking over to join him where he sat on the window ledge. Our backs leaned against the wall as we faced each other. “I’m worried too,” I admitted, my voice honest. “But are you sure you’re okay? You’ve been...quiet since last night.”

Lucas’s smile stretched wider, but the shadows that haunted his eyes only deepened. “I’m okay, Guppy. You don’t have to worry about me. I just had a moment, that’s all.”

I wanted to believe him, to trust in the warm, familiar light of his smile. But the smoke that still clung to him, that I could smell with every breath, was a reminder of his pain.

“You know you can come to me, right?” I reached out, my hand hovering near his. “I’m here for you.”

Lucas’s smile wavered, but he still managed to keep it intact. “I know, Grace,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper as he ran his fingers down my cheek. “You and our circle are all I need.”

Why did it feel like he was saying this to himself?

I could sense the vulnerability and fear hiding behind his words, making my heart ache even more. He needed me, and I needed him just as much.

Lucas pulled me closer, settling me between his legs as I leaned against him. Our hearts beat in unison. A steady rhythm mirrored the need that was pulsing between us.

“I love you, Grace,” he whispered against my lips, his eyes shining with a raw, powerful emotion.

My hand tightened in his shirt as I rose to meet his lips with mine. Our kiss deepened, fueled by longing and a passion that was impossible to ignore. His tongue reached out, eagerly seeking entrance which I happily gave him while I pushed him further back toward the wall, straddling him.

It felt good having our lower halves connected. The heat coming off him only fueled my own fire. I pressed further into him as his hands touched me everywhere. I couldn't stop my hips from rocking against his hard bulge.

Lucas stiffened under me.

“We need to stop.” He panted, pulling away. He easily picked me up and placed me back on the seat next to him before getting up, creating distance between us. The act brought a chill to the raging fire I just felt.

I sat there uncertain of what I'd just done wrong. What we both did felt good, and the way Lucas reacted to my advances felt like he wanted to continue, but for some reason, he backed off.

“Did I do something?” I asked, my voice wobbling with insecurity.

Lucas palmed his head, brushing his curly hair back from his eyes as he looked at me with shock, “What? No, Guppy, you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“But you stopped.”

I didn’t understand. When I kissed him, he felt back to normal. The smoke he produced had completely vanished, only leaving a burning fire of need. I wanted to continue to help him.

“I stopped because you want this for the wrong reasons.” He whispered, sitting on my bed, away from me.

*Was it really that wrong to want to make him feel good?*

“I know I haven’t... we haven’t....” My cheeks felt like the sun itself. “We haven’t done anything sexual.”

“Guppy,” He sighed.

“No, listen. I know you have been going slow with me, but I...I do want to do things with you. You don’t need to walk around it. I want it.” I said, heading towards him to sit on the bed next to him.

I knew in the past he’d done stuff with other people to make himself feel good, and I was here willing to do that. So why was he hesitant now? Was it that bad to do this for him?

“You’ve done stuff with other people,” I whispered out loud.

“They don’t matter,” he replied firmly, his eyes shining warmly and affectionately. “You’re different, Guppy. You’re

part of my inner circle. I want us to experience things together because you want it too.”

I felt a flicker of nervousness, but I pushed it aside. “I do want to try,” I whispered, moving closer. The rising bulge between his legs was a clear indication of his own desire.

“Fuck, Guppy.” He hissed while his hand came up to my hair, grabbing it in a tight fist to hold me still, but it caused a delicious pain to shoot straight down towards my clit.

I pressed forward, “I want to try things with you. Explore like touching you, and I want to try putting my mouth here.” I placed my hand over his hard member.

“How the fuck do you know what a blowjob is, Guppy?” Lucas asked, his mouth agape, but his hips ground against my palm, making me feel it even more against the fabric.

“Hannah,” I mumbled, feeling slightly embarrassed we were even having this conversation.

“Oh, hell no. I am not letting the wicked witch of the west have a say in our bedroom activities.”

I smiled, feeling a rush of affection for Lucas’s confident, assertive side emerging.

“I’ll have you know I do know certain things. I’ve watched...” Embarrassment stopped me from continuing that sentence.

“You’ve watched?” He asked smugly, his eyebrow-raising.



I huffed, crossing my arms, “I’ve watched porn. I’m not completely oblivious.”

“Never said you were, Guppy,” Lucas said, a smirk playing at the corners of his lips. “But next time you want to watch, invite me over.”

His words sent a warm flush to my cheeks as my pulse quickened.

“You want to....” I trailed off, my voice excited and nervous at the thought.

“Watching others together is one thing,” Lucas said, his voice deepening with desire. “But feeling each other’s pleasure, need, and passion, that’s a whole other experience. It can consume you completely, driving both of us to beg for release from the other’s touch. In the end, we wouldn’t be watching the screen but each other.”

I tried to swallow down the heat that was simmering in my room.

“Remember when you came to my place, and I touched you?” He asked, his voice thick with desire. His hand trailed over my thigh.

I nodded while my mouth went completely dry at the memory. Even my thighs quivered at his touch.

“It was amazing, right? But with our bond more open than it was then. It will be another level of intensity. I don’t know what will happen. I’m worried that it would push you to do something that you’re not ready for.”

“Can I see?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

Lucas inhaled sharply, his eyes blazing with heat as he looked at me, making my body shiver with a thrill.

“Grace,” he said, his voice raw with emotion. “I don’t want you to do this if you think this is what I want. I want you to feel comfortable.”

“I am comfortable,” I replied, my need matching his. “I want to know what it will feel like. Please, can you show me? I promise you, if it’s too much, I will tell you.”

Lucas looked into my eyes, searching for any signs of hesitation.

“Okay,” he said finally, his voice a husky whisper full of desire. “You can see.”

My heart was running as Lucas got up from the bed. I felt like I wasn’t in control of my body as a feverish heat pushed me out of the driver’s seat as he pulled his sweatpants down, allowing me to see his raging arousal.

His hairs were darker around his sex, all nicely trimmed, while his thickened member curved upwards towards his stomach. His pink mushroom tip was exposed, pointing upwards while a bead of clear liquid trailed down his length.

“Can I touch it?” I whispered, my hands itching to reach out and touch it.

Lucas cursed out loud while his dick flexed upwards at my voice.

“Yeah.” He moaned, swallowing thickly. “You can touch me.”

It was hot to touch as it quivered in my grasp, a scorching firmness that had a silkiness to it.

“Fuck!” Lucas gritted out before a groan followed. “You’re going to kill me.”

“I’m not hurting you, am I?” I asked as I moved my hand up and down his entire velvet length, stroking him. I loved the feeling of exploring him. It was an addiction of pure heat that only built.

“No,” he said hoarsely. I turned to watch his body reacting to my strokes.

With each tug I did, the strands of our bond buzzed and quivered, sending ripples of pleasure directly into me. Sending heat waves to my own center, throbbing with a need.

Lucas’s entire body looked rigid from holding himself back. I could tell he didn’t want to scare me, but he couldn’t stop the occasional thrust. His hips would jolt forward, wanting more.

I could tell he wanted me to quicken up my speed, but a thrill swept through me as I continued with my casual pace. Lucas moaned while our bond ignited with a captivating lick of frustration and eagerness. He wanted more, but the torture he felt just made it all the better for him.

I was burning up, but my body and mind needed more. I could even feel my own nipples harden, giving teasing friction against the fabric of my shirt.

It was an addiction. I held a part of him in my grasp, controlling his pleasure. He was exposed to me, which made me feel an overwhelming surge of power. It overwhelmed me so much that it frightened me.

I could so easily push myself over the edge just from the feeling alone.

Feeling Lucas's emotions. I knew he would allow me to do anything. His arousal had clouded his mind. He wouldn't care if I hurt him at this point. The thought of that spiked his pleasure as he moaned out, finally fucking my hand.

"Fuck, Guppy!" He groaned, his hips surging with a drive, his own hand wrapped over mine, tightening my hold. I could feel the throb of his cock as I felt my own clit pulse along with him.

It was too much. It was too hot.

"I don't know if I can do anymore," I whispered, but I didn't want to stop. In fact, my entire body demanded more. I wanted to taste the flowing beads of precum pooling out of his tip, but I didn't want to push myself.

"It's okay." Lucas panted, his hand taking over and stroking his cock with a known motion. I watched his hand go to work, watching what he liked to have done to himself. Lucas must have liked to be watched as his eyes blazed when our eyes connected, and his mouth opened with a soft order.

"Watch me." He hissed out as his hand tugged his cock faster. His other hand went down towards his cock also, but he

went further, caressing his tightened balls. “Feel me.”

I could feel him. I felt each stroke he gave himself, each pull and tug. It was like he was doing all this to me, and my own hips moved along my comforter, needing friction.

I wanted to touch myself to explore this feeling alongside him. It was a call, a need that was so intoxicating that my clit ached so much it hurt.

“Fuck, Grace!” He groaned, shutting his eyes firmly before his hips jolted forward.

The bond tightened while pulsating pleasure erupted into me, rushing out a heavenly peak just as the ropes of his cum came onto his stomach and chest.

We both sat there, panting and shuddering from the peaking sensation from our bond. Our bodies were one as a wash of relaxation hit us. Even the bond turned into a fuzzy mess bringing a new sensation of sensitivity each time it sent our emotions to each other.

“That was...” I panted, trailing off as there weren’t any words to describe it.

“That was incredible,” he whispered, his eyes shining with wonder.

I nodded in agreement, unable to form words in the face of such overwhelming emotions. Lucas leaned in and pressed his lips to mine, sending a spark of desire again through my body.

“Yeah,” I breathed out, feeling the strong satisfaction pulsing through our connection. I shivered at the memory,

feeling my body still buzzing with the aftershocks of the pleasure.

I was unable to form words as I lay back on my bed, my mind struggling to catch up with the intensity of the experience. But even as I tried to catch my breath, I could feel the longing deep within me, the desire to do it all over again.

Lucas chuckled, the sound filled with amusement and recognition as he, too, felt the same insistent pull of desire.

“I’ve only felt half of what we just felt when I did it with Vinny. I knew it could be intense with the bond open, but nothing could have prepared me for that level.” He whispered, nuzzling my neck. A sad smolder came off him as he hugged me before reluctantly getting up.

Turning my head, I gave him a concerned look. “Are you okay?” I asked, not liking the sudden shift in his mood.

He nodded, “Yeah, it just made me realize how much I’ve been missing out with Vincent.”

“I’m sorry,”

“Don’t be, Guppy.” He said, looking down at the mess on his stomach, “I need to clean up,” he said, making his way to the bathroom with a shake of his head.

As I waited for him to return, I lay there, still stunned by the raw energy that had surged through me from the experience with Lucas. Our connection was like a current of electricity, amplified by his presence alone.

*What would it feel like if Vincent was also here?*

It was a thrilling thought.

With a sudden jolt, the bond trembled and gasped, sending me jolting upright in bed. The intense energy pulsing through the bond was palpable, leaving me on edge.

“Fuck!” Lucas cried out, a mixture of pain and excitement in his voice.

I felt a chill of fear run down my spine. It was happening again.

“Lucas?” I called out, filled with concern. I quickly got out of bed and rushed towards the bathroom.

Lucas stumbled out, his eyes wide and wild, with pupils unnaturally dilated. While his unsteady hands wiped his cheek and nose continuously.

“You know what? What we just did gave me a brilliant idea,” he said, his voice filled with excitement and elation. His eyes were blazing with manic energy.

As Lucas spoke, I felt a wave of dread wash over me. The bond was alive, with a frenetic energy coursing through us both and sending shivers down my spine.

“Lucas, what are you talking about?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady despite the rising panic in my chest.

His grip on reality seemed to be slipping, his eyes wild and uncontrolled. I could feel the bond between us thrumming with a manic energy, mirroring the fervor in his veins.

“I think I’ve found a way to finally get Vincent to open up,” he declared, his voice ringing confidently. He reached out and grabbed my shoulders, his fingers gripping me tightly.

“But you said you didn’t want us to do something we didn’t want to do,” I reminded him, my voice trembling with fear and uncertainty.

“It’s for the good of the bond, Guppy,” he continued, his fingers digging deeper into my skin. I winced, pain radiating from his grip. “I won’t let him keep this from us any longer.”

“Lucas, you’re hurting me,” I said, trying to pull away from his grasp.

“Oh, sorry,” he said, releasing me with an awkward chuckle.

“I just don’t feel comfortable forcing him,” I said, feeling a knot form in my stomach at the very thought.

Lucas’ grin, however, only seemed to grow wider as he replied, “Don’t worry, the guy’s an asshole. He’ll like it. We both can go to my house, we can’t be here with your parents-them not knowing and all. But we can go to my room. No one should be home, and we can get him to come over!”

I felt dizzy, trying to keep up with Lucas’ rapid-fire suggestions. I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself as my thoughts spiraled.

“Let’s take a moment to think this through,” I said, trying to slow down the conversation.

“We don’t have a moment! We need to call him and get him over to my house, then we-”



Lucas continued, his words coming out in a rush.

I could see the wild desperation in his eyes, the sense of urgency in his voice. He was so invested in this idea, so sure that it was the right thing to do.

“Come on, Guppy!” he barked, his voice filled with urgency. “You drive. But wait! Get the car ready. I need to grab something real quick.”

As he disappeared into my room, I felt dazed and bewildered.

Was it our bond that was pushing Lucas to act like this?

One thing Lucas was right on, we needed Vincent. He was the only one who could handle the situation, and I desperately needed his calm demeanor to guide us through this. I was sure he was the only one that could handle Lucas.

I was grateful that my parents were at the farmers market this afternoon, not wanting them to see Lucas in this state of hyperactivity. I glanced down at my phone, seeing a barrage of messages from Vincent.

Speak of the devil.

Vincent: **Is Lucas with you?**

Vincent: **Get Lucas to call me.**

Vincent: **I need to find Lucas.**

Hearing my front door slam and Lucas locking the door behind him with his own key, I noticed he had a bag over his shoulder.

*When did he get that?*

“Let’s go, Guppy,” he urged, his eyes shining with excitement and determination.

I could sense his eagerness to get to Vincent, to put his plan into action. He was like a caged animal, restless and ready to be unleashed.

“Vincent is blowing up my phone,” I said. “He wants you to call him.”

“Perfect,” Lucas replied with a grin. “I’ll call him and lead him to us.”

Lucas eagerly grabbed his phone and dialed Vincent’s number, his eyes gleaming with a mix of excitement.

“Vinny! I’ve got a surprise for you. Can you come over to my place?”

Lucas shot me a mischievous wink as he listened to Vincent’s reply on the other end, his body vibrating with energy.

“What’s crawled up your ass?” Lucas growled into the phone, his irritation palpable as he hung up. I couldn’t help but feel a twinge of worry as I struggled to focus on the road ahead.

“Just get here!” Lucas barked into the phone, his voice stern and commanding. I could feel the tension radiating from him like a heatwave.

“I don’t understand your plan,” I whispered, trying to process my swirling emotions.

Lucas let out a chuckle, dismissive and casual. “It’s simple, Guppy. We will break down Vincent’s walls and force him to confront the fear that’s been holding him back. We will get him so horny, so the bond between him and us will be overstimulated, and that wall of his will finally come tumbling down.”

“Lucas, I’m not comfortable with that,” I protested, feeling my heartbeat faster at the thought of what he was proposing. “The reason Vincent is so shielded is that he’s scared. He’ll only retreat further from us if we try to plow through it.”

But Lucas just waved his hand. “Don’t worry your pretty little heart, Guppy. I’ll be doing all the work. All you need to do is watch the magic happen.”

I could sense his unwavering confidence, but I couldn’t shake the feeling of unease.

He wasn’t listening. I was certainly not going through with this madness. I just needed Vincent to come and help me figure out what was going on with him.

What if he doesn’t show? I thought worriedly.

The drive with Lucas was shrouded in silence, but it was uneasy. I could sense his restlessness, and it only served to heighten my own anxiety.

Lucas’ body was wracked with tremors, his hands fidgeting and clutching as he rubbed his thighs nervously. Beads of

sweat dotted his forehead, but he quickly swept them away, not wanting to show any signs of weakness. His shallow breaths and the loud clicking of his tongue echoed in the car, amplifying the unease.

I couldn't ignore the gut-wrenching feeling that this was not just the bond at play. This was something else.

Something ugly.

As we approached his house, I felt our bond's familiar, soothing hum beginning to heal. It was enough to lighten my heavy heart, but I kept a wary eye on Lucas. His hands shook as he fumbled with the key, his gray shirt damp with sweat. Yet, despite his disheveled appearance, he forced a smile my way, trying to ignore the guilt that swelled within him.

The house was eerily quiet, exactly as Lucas had predicted. "Now, we should wait in my room," he said.

"Lucas, I don't think-" I started, but he cut me off with a sudden outburst.

"Do you want us to get better, Grace? I'm trying to fix us!" he yelled, making me jump back from him.

He let out a forced laugh, his eyes pleading as he reached for me. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, that I shouted. I'm happy, okay? You don't have to worry about me anymore. We're fine."

Oh, Lucas, what have you done?

His smile faded, and our connection began to calm.

“I’m just going to use the bathroom real quick,” he said, tapping the backpack by his side.

I could only nod, struggling to hold back tears as I tried to keep my composure. I wanted to collapse, to beg for my Lucas to return.

I scurried into Lucas’s room, desperation clawing at my insides as I frantically dialed Vincent’s number. The sound of his voice was like a lifeline, offering me a sliver of hope.

“Grace,” Vincent’s tone was calming, like a soothing balm to my rising panic.

“Vincent! You need to get to Lucas’s place quickly!” I whispered urgently, fear choking my voice. “There is something wrong with Lucas. He’s acting strange... please open your bond with him. It feels...”

“Grace, I need you to take a deep breath for me, okay?” Vincent’s voice was steady, offering a glimmer of stability to my rapidly spiraling emotions.

“Okay,” I managed to say, my voice shaking. I took a few deep breaths, trying to steady my nerves.

“Good girl, now tell me what’s going on.” Vincent encouraged me.

With a trembling voice, I recounted the situation to Vincent. “Lucas is acting so strangely. It started last night - I thought it was just the bond making him act out, but it feels wrong. He’s not himself at all.”

“Right, I’m on my way. I need you to remain calm,” Vincent reassured me. “Is his family home?” Vincent asked.

“No,” I replied, grateful for that small mercy. The way Lucas was quick to anger, I doubted having his family around would help.

“Good, that’s good. Now, Grace, did he have a bag with him? A rucksack with holes on one of the straps?”

“Yes, he had a bag,” I confirmed, trying to remember the details. “But I didn’t see any holes in it.”

“I’m going to kill him,” Vincent seethed.

“Vincent, what’s going on?” I asked, my voice rising in panic.

“It will be okay, Grace. I will be there soon. Keep him calm,” Vincent said before hanging up.

As I waited for Vincent to arrive, the minutes felt like a never-ending torture. I wandered aimlessly around Lucas’s room, listening intently for any sign of him, but as time ticked by, there was still no sign of him coming out of the bathroom.

Should I go check on him? I wondered, biting my lip in indecision.

Then, the sound of footsteps echoed through the house, bringing me a ray of hope. I rushed towards Vincent as soon as he entered the room, his piercing gray eyes scanning the space for any sign of Lucas. He opened his arms and embraced me tight, offering me the comfort I desperately needed.

“Where is he?” Vincent asked, his body shaking with fear or anger. I couldn’t tell without the bond.

“He’s still in the bathroom,” I replied, feeling my own fear rising with each passing moment. “You can help him, right?”

“Yes,” Vincent said with a cool certainty, his voice unwavering. “But I need you to leave while I confront him.”

“Confront him about what?” I asked, my mind racing with possibilities.

“I promise I’ll explain everything once I sort things out,” Vincent replied, his eyes meeting mine. “But for now, it’s best if you leave. Lucas would thank me for getting you out of here.”

Tears filled my eyes as I struggled with the thought of leaving Lucas behind. “I’m part of this circle,” I protested. “I should be here for him. Both of us together.”

How it should be!

Vincent’s eyes darkened. “This is not a situation where anyone should be,” he said, his voice tight. “But especially not you. Please, trust me.”

“Is it drugs?” I asked, my voice trembling.

Vincent closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I promise to explain everything once I’ve sorted him out,” he said.

“It is, isn’t it?” I asked with a voice filled with despair and a sense of betrayal. My heart felt like it was breaking into a million pieces, and the bile of nausea rose in my throat.

Vincent heaved a sigh, his face expressing the weight of the situation.

“Yes,” he whispered, confirming my worst fears.

Tears flowed endlessly down my face as the truth hit me with a force that left me gasping for air. I had been so foolish, so blind to the signs. His erratic behavior, his guilt-ridden expressions. It all made sense now, but I was too blinded to the reality of it all.

It was far worse than I had imagined.

“He took drugs in my home,” I stammered, my voice trembling with fear and anger. “Where did he get them from?”

Vincent’s face twitched with what appeared to be a mixture of guilt and pain. A pained sound escaped him, and he closed his eyes as if trying to push back the emotions.

“Grace, I promise you, I will find out and make it right,” he said with a voice filled with determination and sorrow. He hugged me tight, comforting and shielding me from the cruel reality.

“How?” I cried, my voice muffled against his chest. “He took drugs in my home, Vincent! How can you fix this?”

But my anger soon overtook my fear as a realization dawned on me. I pulled away, hot tears streaming down my face.

“Is he using them now?” I shouted, my voice shaking with rage.



Vincent hesitated for a moment, his gray eyes clouded with sadness and frustration. “Yes,” he finally admitted, his voice heavy with regret. “But I swear to you, I’ll do everything in my power to help him. He’s beaten this before, and he can do it again.”

“Before?” My head was ringing. “He’s done this before, and neither of you told me.”

I stumbled backward, my legs unable to hold me steady as I tried to process the information. The betrayal of not being told, the hurt, and the disappointment was suffocating.

“I need to go,” I whispered, my voice barely audible. I couldn’t bear to be in that room any longer, to be near Vincent and face the situation.

But Vincent’s grip on me tightened, not letting me escape the reality of what was happening.

“I will call you after I confront him, okay?” he said, his voice firm but gentle. “I promise I will tell you everything.”

His promise hung heavy in the air, but I couldn’t help but feel like a part of me was already breaking, shattered by the revelation that the people I trusted had kept this from me.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## LUCAS

I leaned over the toilet sink, groaning in pleasure as the numbing sensations swept through my face. The constant trickle at the back of my throat was just a reminder of the pure bliss I was experiencing.

This was so fucking good.

Much better than this morning.

My high last night had only lasted twenty minutes before the feeling of doubt, and the overthinking dread returned. I was back to the murky world, drowning with the hate I felt for myself growing by the second.

I was better off this way. With each hit, I felt a surge of power and vitality course through me, pushing me to be better and do more for my circle.

I was unstoppable.

*That was definitely the last time.* I thought to myself.

But then, a nagging thought surfaced in my mind. Grace was still waiting in my room. She had been wary of me as if I was a danger to her. I couldn't understand why she looked at me that way when I felt so alive. I deserved a moment of release, a little pick me up occasionally.

Was it really so wrong to find solace in this temporary boost?

Grace would understand once she and I carried out our plan and I proved myself to her.

Just one more line. Just to keep on top of things.

"Fuck," I muttered, covering my face with my hands. The need for another fix was becoming unbearable.

A cold spear sliced through me when I noticed Vincent standing at the bathroom door, his gray eyes blazing with anger. The fury in his gaze made his pupils dilate, a clear sign that he was pissed.

"What- Vincent!" I yelped, fumbling to hide the two baggies in the sink, hoping he wouldn't see them. My eyes darted to the bag by the door, just behind him.

Shit...

I could already feel the sweat beading on my forehead as I tried to think of a way out of this situation. But my thoughts seemed to leave me while Vincent's icy gaze locked onto mine, his expression a mixture of anger and disappointment.

"You got here faster than I expected," I said, trying to cover my nerves with a forced laugh as I sidestepped towards the

countertop, hoping to block his view, but before I could say or do anything more, my body slammed against the bathroom sink.

“You did not just use again!” Vincent roared, his grip on my shirt tightening with anger. The force of his words felt like a physical blow, sending my heart racing and my stomach plummeting.

“No!” I lied. The panic, along with the line of coke I just snorted, was doing strange shit in my system. I felt the rush of adrenaline. But it felt too tight in my chest. Or maybe it was just me panicking at him finding out.

“No?” Vincent sneered, grabbing the empty baggie from the sink. “Then what the hell is this?”

“I can explain!” I stammered, my mind racing as I tried to uncurl Vincent’s fingers from my shirt.

“Really?” The sarcasm in Vincent’s voice was intense, and I couldn’t help the nervous laughter that escaped my lips.

“Look, how about we go into my room,” I spoke rapidly, trying to diffuse the situation. “Me and Grace have a surprise for you,” I said quickly, my heart pounding like a drum in my chest.

*You promised him...*

I pushed away the nagging voice reminding me of my broken promise and tried to sidestep him.

“Grace is gone, Lucas,” Vincent said, his voice a low, icy rumble.

I felt my heart shatter into a million pieces at the news.

“What?” I stumbled, my eyes desperately searching Vincent’s for any sign that he was lying.

“I made her leave. She didn’t need to see you like this. She was scared out of her fucking mind because of your high ass!” Vincent’s words were brutal, and I felt their impact, leaving me winded.

“No,” I whispered, refusing to accept his words. Grace wouldn’t leave me. She promised she wouldn’t.

I pushed past Vincent, anger, and fear fueling me as I stormed into my room, shouting for Grace.

“Grace!” My head was clouded, but I powered through the dizziness that was threatening to overwhelm me. I couldn’t fail her now.

I searched the room, but she was nowhere to be found, and the darkness outside told me that time was slipping away.

Just how long had I been in the bathroom?

“I told you she is gone,” Vincent’s voice was cold as ice as he entered my room, the rucksack in hand.

Seeing it made my heart race and my tongue grow thick in my mouth. My body quivered with fear as a dizzy spell threatened to send me crashing to the ground.

“Vinny,” I tried to call out to him, hoping to distract him from the bag. But it was too late. He was already fixated on the rucksack, his hand reaching out to open it.

I couldn't stand the look in Vincent's eyes when he turned back to me. I could feel his piercing gaze demanding an explanation. He was searching for a reason, a justification, but we both knew the truth. The rucksack wasn't mine.

I tried to push down my rising terror as I heard the sound of the zipper being undone. There was a moment of silence before Vincent looked down into the bag, his eyes taking in the sight of the small plastic bags, each filled with cocaine.

"I hoped it wasn't you," he whispered, zipping the bag back up. "I hoped the temptation wouldn't get the better of you."

"I..." I trailed off. I felt a twinge of guilt, but it was quickly replaced by panic and paranoia. My body was on high alert, waiting for Vincent's next move.

His face was pale with shock as he looked up at me. I watched his sadness turn to anger.

"You've been hiding out at Grace's with a bag full of coke," he accused, his voice low and filled with disgust. "You took this shit to her home, tainting her space. I thought we were bad enough, but you had to take it further."

"I was going to give it back," I stammered, "I was keeping it safe."

Vincent's piercing gaze made me feel small as he slowly shook his head, his fists clenched tight with rage. "Really?" he sneered, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "After you took half of the product? And on top of that, you're using again after you promised me!"

“Officer Cody showed up, and everyone ran,” I explained, pleading for understanding. “Your boy was panicking, frozen in fear, and I couldn’t let him get caught. He would’ve talked, Vinny. He would’ve cracked, and your name would’ve been the first to come out.”

“You really believe in your own lies, don’t you?” He huffed while shaking his head with a staggered expression on his face.

“I’m not lying!” I protested, my voice rising with desperation. But as the words left my lips, I felt a creeping sense of uncertainty.

Was I really telling the truth?

I felt sure I was. I wasn’t going to take any. It just happened!

“Do you have any idea what JD went through when Samson thought he had lost all of this?” Vincent asked, his voice low and menacing. Despite the soft tone, I could see the anger seething beneath the surface, the tremors in his hands betraying his wrath.

“I know a little bit,” I said bitterly, my mind racing with excuses. “But I wasn’t going to keep it all.”

With a loud thud, Vincent slammed the bag down on the table and stepped toward me, his eyes blazing with anger.

“Don’t give me that, Lucas! You, of all people, should know the consequences of stealing from Samson. And to let JD take the fall?”

“I wasn’t....” I trailed off as Vincent’s eyes hit me with a challenge to dare me to finish that sentence.

“I allowed you to smoke weed, even made you think you were taking my stuff,” Vincent continued, his voice growing louder with each word. “But this, this is a hard line. A line I thought we’d established long ago!”

“I was trying to follow it,” I said, pleading with him to understand. “But with the situation with Grace and everything...”

“So you found another member of our circle, and now you’re hitting it again?” Vincent sneered. “Why not just go all out and hit a line just for old times’ sake!”

“It’s not like that!” I yelled, pulling at my hair in frustration. “I wanted to be better. I wanted to be more.”

“Is this better?” Vincent screamed back, kicking the bag across the room.

“I’ve only taken it once before, twice in total!” I said reasonably. He was acting like I was an everyday user again. “I can quit anytime. I just needed a pick-me-up to help Grace.”

“Don’t you dare try to pin this on her,” Vincent warned, his voice low and dangerous.

I frantically shook my head, “No, I didn’t mean it like that. I wasn’t doing well, and she was worried about you. She didn’t need to worry about me. I was trying to help, to make things better for both of us.”

I wasn’t sure if I was speaking clearly, but I continued.



“Let’s get Grace back here, and everything will be slightly better. I can fix this!”

“Stop with the fucking fixing!” Vincent shouted, “You think taking this will help anything?”

“I thought of a plan to get you to open up!”

“I’m trying to help!” I protested.

Vincent laughed bitterly, his eyes full of disappointment. “Stealing and using drugs, that’s your idea of helping? I’m so done with cleaning up after you, Lucas. You always think you have all the answers, but you have no idea what the consequences of your actions are. You’re just looking for ways to make yourself feel better.”

“Please, Vinny,” I begged, stepping closer to him, “It doesn’t mean anything. We can just get rid of it, flush it away.”

“And let Samson blame someone else?”

I couldn’t bring myself to speak as the thought tightened my chest and made my words die in my throat.

“And what if I told Samson I found it with a few missing baggies? Then he would know I was hiding the thief in the first place,” Vincent pointed out, his frustration mounting. “Either way, JD won’t be able to support his family because you let him take the heat, someone who is under my protection!”

“What about me? What about our circle?” I fired back, slapping my chest in frustration. “Don’t I matter? Can’t you see that I’m trying to help?”

Vincent's voice was low and controlled, but I could sense the hidden regret and anger he was struggling to keep in check. His eyes were dark, like storm clouds ready to unleash a downpour, as he gazed at me, his expression unreadable.

"You think I don't care about you?" he asked, his tone steely and sharp as a knife. "Who got you clean?" Vincent continued his voice now a growl.

"And who got me hooked in the first place?" I yelled back, my own anger rising and my voice shaking with frustration. "It's because of you that I am what I am now. That's the truth. Everything would be so much better if you never joined Samson!"

I watched as Vincent's face twisted in pain before he turned away, his back rigid.

"Vinny..." I whispered in horror at the realization of what I had just said. I felt guilt and regret crushing me as I realized my mistake. "Vinny, I'm sorry!"

But Vincent just gave a cold, bitter laugh, rubbing his hands over his face. "Don't be," he said, his voice tight. "It's the truth, isn't it. This is all my fault."

With a heavy sigh, Vincent slung a bag over his shoulder, his expression of grim determination.

"I'm going to bring Grace back here," he declared, his voice filled with a sense of purpose. "We both will explain everything to her. It's the least she deserves."

Despite his resolve, a sad mumble escaped Vincent's lips, a shadow passing over his face. "Let's just hope she still stays with us after," he whispered, his eyes filled with regret and fear.

He turned and left the room, his steps slow and heavy, his heart weighed down by the knowledge of what was to come.

This wasn't a problem! Vincent was just overreacting! It wasn't a big deal. I took some and got clean before I could do it again. I just needed it to help Grace.

Grace...

I needed to get to Grace. I needed to explain, to do something!

My hand dived into my pocket to get my phone, but instead, I touched the soft plastic baggy I had forgotten about. Vincent took the bag, but this one remained in my possession.

I couldn't remember why I kept it, but here it was, taunting me with its presence.

Just one more hit. You will need it before they come back, and you ruin everything further.

I felt a wave of conflicting emotions wash over me as I looked at it. Part of me wanted to throw it away and never look back, but another part of me felt a desperate urge to use it just one last time. I was consumed by fear and anxiety, my thoughts a jumbled mess.

Would one hit really hurt?

I had been able to resist the urge in the past, but this time felt different. The thought of facing Vincent and Grace with everything that had happened was overwhelming. And with the bag right there in my hand, it seemed so easy to give in just one last time.

It was there, promising me it would provide the courage to face Vincent and Grace.

This is the last time.

Turning to my bedside table, my hands shook as I poured out a line of the powder, my body automatically knowing what to do. I wanted to numb the pain and the guilt, just for a little while. I wanted control.

The familiar rush of euphoria hit me like a punch in the face, but it was followed by a new sensation. It forced me to cry out as my head felt on fire.

I was writhing on the floor, consumed by agony. My body convulsed with each cramp that hit my stomach, leaving me gasping for air. It was like a blazing inferno had taken over my body, making it impossible to think or move.

I was on fire again! I panicked. I was burning alive!

My nose and eyes ran freely as I struggled to catch my breath. Each inhale felt like a knife slicing through my chest. I was trembling uncontrollably, my nose running as I struggled to breathe through the pain.

But even as I lay there, helpless and consumed by the inferno inside me, I felt the dread building within me. I didn't

know how I knew something was coming, but it felt like a certainty in my soul, warning me of impending doom.

My heart raced as sweat dripped from my forehead, each beat pounding in my chest while I searched the floor, searching desperately for my phone.

I reached for my phone, my hand shaking as I dialed Vincent's number.

I needed him. I needed someone to help me.

The phone rang, each ring feeling like a cruel joke as hopelessness rose within me. And then, the line cut as Vincent's pre-recorded message started playing.

I tried to reach out through our bond but was hit with an endless void leaving me cold and alone.

*They both blocked me out.*

With a sob, I hung up.

I was completely alone, with no one to help me as the world spun out of control.

The loneliness was suffocating, pushing me down, making me curl in on myself in a futile attempt to find comfort. The fear and nausea twisted in my stomach, threatening to consume me as my world went pitch black, and the darkness welcomed me home.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### GRACE

*I'm so stupid!* I thought angrily. I was fuming with rage as I sat in my car, parked in a random lot. I'd been driving around town aimlessly, unable to go home or go back because if I did, I knew I would erupt.

My cheeks still burned with anger, and my tongue felt heavy with the weight of unsaid words and things I now wished I'd done.

I had allowed Lucas to keep his secrets, even though it chipped away at my soul, and Vincent treated us like we meant nothing to him. I had hoped that all my sacrifices and patience would bring us closer together, but instead, I was left with a bitter ache in my heart and a sense of emptiness.

It was all for nothing.

The anger inside me was like a blazing inferno, consuming the bond I shared with Lucas and Vincent. The connection between us was like a fiery rope that threatened to burn everything in its path.

As I felt Lucas's shock and worry through our bond, I knew I couldn't bear to feel him any longer. So I pushed him away, severing our connection completely. I refused to be a part of his high. He had contaminated our sacred bond.

*How could I ever forgive him?* The thought was like a physical pain in my chest, making me feel as if I was suffocating. I rested my head against the steering wheel, feeling the cool rubber against my skin. I'm overcome with mixed emotions – anger, sadness, and betrayal. I don't know if I can ever forgive either of them.

I would give anything to make the past disappear. I wasn't a killer, but I was willing to sacrifice anything, even an innocent animal, to make this wish come true. I would even sell all parts of my soul to rewind time.

*'He's beaten this before and can do it again.'* Vincent's words pierced me. I didn't know whether I wanted to scream in rage or cry for my circle member.

The thought of Lucas's addiction coming to light just made my head spin, building a wave of nausea I had to swallow down.

*Just how long had Lucas been struggling with this?*

*Why hadn't they told me?*

Vincent promised honesty, along with Lucas, but they both brushed this aside like it meant nothing. But this wasn't nothing. I had been around an addict, and I had no clue. I

should have known better, should have been more observant and more aware of the things that were happening around me.

I tried to take deep breaths, but my chest felt tight, constricted by the weight of the truth. The truth that Vincent and Lucas kept from me. As a circle, we should have been a team that trusted each other and had each other's backs.

But now, it feels like I've been played like a fool.

A soft, shrill vibration came from my pocket. Someone was calling me, and I was tempted to leave it, but my curiosity got the better of me as I pulled it out.

*Vincent.*

Why did he have to call me now when I was drowning in my own self-doubt? All I wanted was one brief moment to process the reality of what I had learned.

Instead of answering, I sent him to voicemail, not ready to face him or the reality of what he had done. I knew he was angry and demanding my attention, but I couldn't give it to him. Not yet.

For once, he was waiting for me, and I could feel his frustration trying to seep through my block like an icy touch. I could practically taste his frustration from it alone. He expected me to just let him in.

*Well, I refuse.*

If he thought he could come barging in while giving me nothing in return, then he had another thing coming. I wanted everything now, and I wasn't happy with anything less.



I wasn't going to allow them to continue down this path.

But he also wasn't giving up as my phone went off again. I felt the pressure of his demand echoing in my chest.

Cursing, I answered.

"Where are you?" Vincent barked immediately.

A part of me wanted to hang up. I didn't want to meet him after what I had just learned.

"Grace?" he asked, sounding unsure for the first time.

I took a deep breath, steeling myself for what was to come. "What do you want, Vincent?" I replied, my voice icy and devoid of emotion, ignoring his question entirely.

A string of curses came from the other end of the line, "I want to see you. Where are you right now?"

*Yeah, that wasn't happening.*

"Grace," His voice rang with a warning which pushed me over the edge.

"You let me be around an addict!" I accused, my voice shaking with rage and hurt.

"He wasn't using when he found you. He was clean, I promise you!" Vincent pleaded, desperation creeping into his voice.

"Neither of you told me!" My tone was heavy with the weight of their betrayal.

"Because we're selfish," He muttered, shame evident in his voice. "We were trying to be people we aren't."

“And who are you both?” I asked, searching for answers.

“Can you tell me where you are? I promise you I will tell you,” Vincent implored, his voice sincere.

A part of me wanted to scream that I didn’t trust him, but instead, I sighed heavily and gave him my location.

Before I knew it, he had reached me and climbed into my passenger seat. I was only a short distance from Lucas’s house, and though I felt the urge to run, I knew I had to stay close.

“How is he?” I asked, unable to look at Vincent, who was catching his breath after sprinting over.

“He was coming down from his high when I left,” Vincent replied, placing a rucksack between his legs.

“It’s in there, isn’t it?” I asked, my hands clutching the steering wheel in horror as I realized the truth. “There are drugs in that bag, aren’t there?”

“Yes,” He whispered, his voice heavy with regret.

A new wave of disgust rolled through my stomach as the reality of the situation hit me.

That bag was in my house. Lucas took drugs just a few steps from me.

I didn’t even want it in my car.

“Grace,” Vincent started, but I couldn’t stand any more lies. I interrupted him with a voice filled with frustration.

“Don’t start with excuses, Vincent. You promised me honesty, so for once, be honest.”

“Lucas got... he...” Vincent rubbed his eyes and took a moment to compose himself. Seeing him looking so disheveled and struggling with his words was unusual. “When it was just the two of us, we understood each other. We didn’t judge or try to change each other. We accepted the worst in each other.”

“You didn’t want him to change and get off whatever he was using?” I asked, feeling nauseated at him not doing anything.

“I didn’t know it was drugs,” Vincent replied regretfully. “It wasn’t until a while after he left the hospital that I noticed something was wrong. I had blocked him from the bond, so I didn’t feel it, but I caught him in the act and got him off it. I thought it was over. I really did. He was supposed to come to me if his cravings returned, but he didn’t.”

“Why? I don’t understand why he’s hooked in the first place!” I exclaimed, my voice shaking with anger and fear.

Vincent hung his head in shame. “It’s my fault,” he said quietly.

“What?” I asked, disbelief in my voice.

“Let’s go back to Lucas. “We can explain everything together,” Vincent offered, but I was no longer satisfied with the excuses.

“No,” I retorted, my voice filled with anger and frustration. “That’s not good enough anymore. I just discovered that one of my circle members has been using drugs behind my back,

and I was completely clueless. I'm hurt, angry, and scared because I don't know what's happening, and you will tell me right now!"

Vincent sighed, removing his glasses and rubbing his eyes in exhaustion. "I work for a guy named Samson," he finally confessed.

"Who is Samson?" I asked, my voice shaking with emotion.

Vincent hesitated before answering, "He's a friend. I do jobs for him around town."

"There's more than you're telling me," I pressed, sensing more to the story.

A lot more. I felt like this was the start of scratching the surface.

Vincent met my gaze, his eyes unblinking and filled with mixed emotions. He took a deep breath before speaking, "Yes."

I didn't know whether to feel relieved that he was being honest or disappointed that there was something more going on. I knew in my gut something else was wrong, but I kept pushing every aside,

'*Grace is naïve,*' my mother's voice returned to me like a ghost whisper.

I needed to do better, to be better.

"Tell me," I demanded.

“No,” Vincent said sharply, opening his eyes again with a flash of disturbance. “I’m handling it. It’s nothing you need to worry about.”

*Where did Lucas get the drugs?* I wanted to scream at him, demanding he admits what was already circling in my mind. I felt my soul was already cracking from the answer I knew deep down was the truth.

Vincent cursed as his phone went off. He quickly turned it off before turning back to me.

“Grace,”

“Shut up, Vincent,” I snapped, my voice cracking with anger and frustration. “The next words that come out of your mouth better be the truth of everything, or I’m going straight to Lucas and demanding he spills everything. And don’t you dare think he won’t because the way I’m feeling right now, he will most definitely spill everything.”

As soon as the words left my lips, I felt a dead chill run through me. Vincent and I froze as I sensed something strange in our bond with Lucas. It felt like a frantic, pulsing tendril trying to get my attention, a desperate, insane plea.

I opened the bond and immediately felt it constrict around my throat like a chain, pulling me under its oppressive weight. I screamed in terror, struggling against the bond as it threatened to suffocate me, to drag me down into its panicked grip.

The world around me disappeared into a fog of dread. I could feel my face contorting from the pressure, my eyes bulging with fear.

“Grace!” Vincent’s voice yelled in the distance, but I couldn’t see through the darkness that had overtaken my vision.

*Air! I needed air!* My mind screamed as I tried to breathe, but nothing was working.

Lucas! Something was happening to him. I could feel it in my soul as his bond surged with distress and fear. He needed help!

“Block him out, Grace!” Vincent barked, his arms wrapping around me as he pulled me into his seat. I heard one door slam as he got out. Another slam as he got back in, now in the driver’s seat. I felt my chest tighten, the dread suffocating me as I struggled to gasp for air. Vincent’s voice was urgent and panicked, “It’s not real, Grace. You can breathe. Connect with me!”

His eyes were wild, his face inches from mine as he yelled, desperately trying to reach me. At that moment, I couldn’t help but reach out to him, to connect through our bond and find solace. He reluctantly allowed me in, offering me a lifeline as I felt his bond snake around me with care and control.

I shuddered as I felt him ground me, offering me a few breaths. But the bond with Lucas was still acting like a feral creature, thrashing wildly.

“Breathe. I don’t know how much longer I can hold it,” Vincent gasped, his voice thick with pain.

I took a few deep breaths as Vincent turned my car on and started to drive.

I took deep breaths as Vincent revved up the car and sped down the road.

“What’s happening?” I asked, gasping for air as the burning in my chest made us cry out. But Vincent kept his focus on the road ahead, determination etched into his features.

“Lucas,” Vincent gritted out. His face was ashen, mirroring the dizziness and nausea that were overwhelming me. “You have to block him out, Grace.”

“Vincent!” I sobbed, torn between following his order and reaching out to Lucas. Something was wrong, and I was cutting him off. I couldn’t bear the thought of doing that to him.

“Don’t, I know it hurts, but we have to. We need to get to him. I’m calling an ambulance to his place. Keep breathing, Grace, okay?” Vincent instructed, already dialing on the phone.

“Oh god, Lucas, is he okay?” I asked, fear lacing my voice. But Vincent didn’t answer me as he was already on the phone speaking rapidly. The coldness gripping my heart intensified as I waited for a response, my stomach twisting in knots.

“Vincent, honestly. Is he okay?” I asked in a panicked whisper, desperation creeping into my voice. But Vincent

continued to ignore me, his hands shaking as he spoke on the phone. I could see his mouth moving, but I couldn't hear anything, the ringing in my ears drowning out the sound.

Another burst of pain hit me square in the chest, sending vibrations throughout my body and making my head feel like it was splitting in two. I brought my hands up to my hair, gripping the strands so tightly that it felt like they would rip from their roots. But it did nothing to ease the pain from within.

What was happening?

A pair of cold hands touched me, pulling me upwards to meet their eyes.

Vincent's steel gray eyes met mine, and his unrelenting aura felt heavy in my chest, reminding me to breathe.

"Out," Vincent's voice sounded muffled despite being right beside me.

Vincent was a storm of emotions, a powerful force that barged into Lucas's house. I could only follow after him, my steps feeling unsteady and disconnected from the ground. It was as if the soles of my feet had lost all feeling.

As we entered Lucas's room, I froze at the sight.

Lucas's body was convulsing on the floor, and a mass of puke was choking him. His face was purple while sickly noises erupted from him. A thick acrid stench was in the air. The sight of him, the smell, and the feeling brought me to my knees while I only felt pain.



Suddenly, everything went silent, leaving me with nothing but white noise. The shock of the situation punched me in the stomach, and I could feel bile rising in my throat.

Vincent was quick to act. He pulled Lucas onto his side, whacking his back, pushing his fingers in his mouth, and trying to clear his airways. I could only watch uselessly as my circle member twitched and jolted aggressively, making my stomach further recoil.

As Vincent shouted at Lucas to breathe, something inside me shifted. The pain I had felt began to ease as something inside me declined. The burning heat of Lucas was going cold.

He was dying.

“Vincent!” I shouted with a plea. I didn’t know what to do, but something in my tone sent Vincent to react.

“Fucking breathe!” He roared as he pushed onto Lucas’s chest again and again.

Nothing was heard as I watched.

*Where was the ambulance? Where was the help!*

“You fucking asshole! You breathe!” Vincent roared again. His face flushed with a fury that I couldn’t feel. My soul was trying to hold onto Lucas as I felt him slip, fading away. My eyes could only watch as his body grew whiter, too white compared to the normally sun-touched skin he always had.

His body was too loose as it jolted with the impact of Vincent’s furious presses. Lucas looked too still, too lifeless.

“Vincent,” I whispered out a sob while the last strand of Lucas’s soul slithered out from me. Then, it was gone, leaving an empty space inside me that I had never experienced before.

A hollow pit that was cold and bare.

I would never feel the heat of Lucas again. He was gone. His part in my soul felt dead.

“No! No! No! No! Please, no!” I screamed till my throat burned.

All the things I wanted to do with Lucas vanished at that moment. No family dinners, simple movie nights, or food shopping trips would exist. His wish to experience a family...

All the simple things that Lucas wanted.

He would never have.

“Don’t you fucking dare!” Vincent thundered, punching Lucas in his chest, sending a spike of electricity through the bond. His fury and pain electrified me, jolting me along with Lucas.

Who gasped in large gulps of air.

I sagged lower to the floor, sobbing with relief as Lucas’s soul flew back into me. He was not as hot as he normally was, but he was back. I felt the space filling up again, bringing back my ability to breathe.

Vincent quickly put him back onto his side, panting with his own relief. Tears freely fell from his cheeks. His eyes caught mine while he still held a tight grip on Lucas’s wrist, feeling

his pulse while the other was close to his nose, sensing the air that he breathed out.

“Come here,” Vincent whispered softly, his hand reaching towards me while the other still held onto Lucas. “It’s okay. I just need to hold you both.”

I crawled, not caring about the puke or blood that was seeping out of Lucas’s nose. I didn’t care about anything except the relief that Lucas was alive.

“I... I... I felt him die.” I cried, struggling to wrap my head around what had just happened. “I felt him....”

“Shhh,” Vincent hushed while his free hand palmed my cheek, bringing me closer to them both.

Tears freely flew as we stayed like that, the three of us on the floor. Holding each other, feeling Lucas’s soul, holding him tight as the paramedics rushed through the door and took over.

My mind was numb. I could only watch as they placed wires on Lucas, checking him over. I couldn’t feel anything. My system was overloaded by everything crashing into me up until this point.

*Lucas would be okay, right?* I never wanted to feel my circle member dying ever again.

I felt cold and hollow, like nothing I saw or felt could reach me.

I couldn’t even comprehend when Vincent approached me with the bag full of drugs. The way he moved to me, his gray

eyes holding mine as he said something, but it was muffled. I was underwater. I could only watch as he quickly stuffed the bag into my hands.

*What?*

I could only grip the item loosely as my body shivered while the cold inside me rattled my teeth.

Vincent said another thing slowly, this time stroking my cheek gently.

*Where was Lucas?* I thought, needing to check on him again.

He died. I felt it. I choked back a sob as I noticed the paramedics lift Lucas onto a stretcher, taking him away. That shocked me back right into reality. They couldn't leave without me!

*Wait!*

As I rushed through the kitchen, I saw Theo standing by the front door, looking pale and sickly. The look he gave me as his son was carried away was one of understanding, a recognition of my pain. He knew because he, too, had experienced the loss of a circle member. But unlike him, I got mine back.

***But for how long?***

"I'm sorry," Theo whispered, his voice piercing through me.

Vincent's hand was like a vise on my shoulder, pulling me towards my car.

“You don’t know shit!” He spat out a venomous reply to Theo, but I understood the apology.

I understood that this moment would forever haunt me and that I would never be able to forget the pain I had felt.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

## GRACE

“We have given him an IV, and he is currently under a sedative in hopes of lowering his blood pressure and heart rate,” the doctor explained once he finally came out of the room.

The words coming from him felt like a distant echo as I stood there, staring blankly at the door that Lucas had been taken behind. It loomed over me like a dark cloud as I stood there, frozen in fear and uncertainty.

Vincent and I had been waiting for answers for what felt like an eternity. We watched doctors and nurses bustle in and out of the room, working on Lucas, but no one seemed to have the answers we desperately needed.

All I wanted was a straightforward answer. Was Lucas going to be okay? But no doctor had given us that assurance yet. Instead, they danced around the question with medical terms that sounded like they were meant to be reassuring but only added to my growing fear and anxiety.

“If you have any information on what he has taken or even have the substance, we could identify the core problem,” the doctor asked.

“We believe he’s taken cocaine,” Vincent spoke up from behind me, his voice cold and firm, trying to provide stability in the face of chaos. He tried to offer comfort by pressing his solid body against mine, but his touch only made me feel more alone, more aware of the heavy weight of guilt I felt.

Just the mention of that horrid drug made the bag I was holding feel heavy. I felt sick to have it on me.

*It killed Lucas....*

All I could focus on was the deep, aching pain in my chest, the fear that Lucas might not make it, and the guilt that I had failed him.

“That is helpful. You both are welcome to wait here while we run the tests. It will most likely be a while until he wakes up,” the doctor said before turning to me with a forced smile. “He’s at the best place for him.”

But his words felt empty like he was reading from a script, unable to provide the comfort we so desperately needed. The uncertainty of Lucas’s fate left me feeling hollow and scared, a prisoner of my own thoughts, replaying what could have been done differently to prevent this tragedy.

I couldn’t shake the feeling that I should have done something more to save him.

“Come on,” Vincent said gravelly, his voice rough with emotion as he gestured for me to follow him back to the hard plastic seats. But I hesitated, my mind racing.

“I should try to contact his dad,” I mumbled as I followed him, feeling a wave of guilt wash over me as I realized I should have thought of this earlier. But, instead, I had phoned my parents quickly, telling them that Lucas was in hospital but hadn’t called Lucas’s family to tell them where they could find their son.

“Don’t bother,” Vincent grumbled. “His dad avoids hospitals. They won’t be visiting. They didn’t come when he was here for his leg.”

I closed my eyes, unable to fathom what Vincent was saying.

*Why wouldn't a parent visit their child in the hospital?*

I saw the exhaustion written all over Vincent’s face, the stress of the day taking its toll on him as he rubbed his weary eyes and ran his fingers through his hair. His glasses, usually perched confidently on the bridge of his nose, were now slightly crooked.

His dim gray eyes were on me, watching me like he was waiting for something. Maybe I could feel his feelings if I was focusing, but our connection was silent. Our souls were guarding our hearts as their main focus went toward the one behind all the closed doors. I could feel my soul clinging to Lucas. I never wanted to feel him slipping away again.



I shuddered at the memory and stood up from my seat, unable to sit still any longer. My eyes roamed over the walls, taking in the sterile and clinical environment of the hospital. The bright, artificial light and the overpowering smell of cleaner made me feel suffocated.

*People die in this building,* I thought morbidly, allowing an opening for the memory of Lucas dying again.

“I’m going to get a coffee. Do you want anything?” Vincent asked softly, but his voice still made me jump. The raw emotions inside me were bubbling close to the surface, making me feel like I was a ticking time bomb, ready to explode at any moment.

Maybe that’s why Vincent was keeping such a close eye on me. I could feel his gaze upon me, intense and full of concern.

“I don’t want anything,” I mumbled, unable to meet his eyes as I looked away.

“Grace, you need to have something,” Vincent persisted. “Let me get you a hot drink.”

“I don’t need anything!” I snapped, feeling a sudden surge of anger. Why couldn’t he see that I couldn’t handle anything in my stomach right now?

The thought of eating or drinking felt wrong and sickening. How could he expect me to act normal when Lucas nearly died?

*No, he did die.*

Why wasn't he as freaked out by what had happened as I was?

My frustration was reaching a breaking point, and I felt like pulling my hair out, yet he wanted coffee.

"Where did he get the drugs, Vincent?" I asked through gritted teeth, my entire body tensing as I prepared for the answer I knew would wound me.

"Grace-" Vincent started, looking around the almost empty waiting room, but I cut him off.

"No. I'm so close to just handing this bag over to the police and getting rid of it," I said, pointing to the rucksack on the chair. I didn't want anything to do with it, but Vincent seemed to think I should hold onto it.

"How, Vincent?" I asked with desperation in my voice, feeling like I was clinging to the edge of a cliff. My heart was pounding in my chest as I waited for his answer.

Vincent's gaze lingered on me for a moment, taking in my distress. His gray eyes were full of shadows and secrets as he hesitated to speak.

"I sell drugs, Grace." he finally whispered, barely audible and avoiding my gaze. The weight of those three words felt like a physical blow.

I felt a rush of emotions as I tried to process what I had just learned. Anger, sadness, disappointment, and confusion all competed for my attention.

“That’s why-” My throat tightened, trying to stop the cry from reaching my mouth. I took a deep breath, forcing back the tears, “Is that why he’s been taking drugs?”

Vincent swallowed hard before slowly nodding his head, confirming my worst fears.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” I muttered, rushing into the bathroom and barely making it to the toilet before losing the contents of my stomach. The world spun around me as I heaved, my mind grappling with the devastating truth of it all.

I felt the familiar hand of Vincent rubbing my back, but my anger and hurt fueled me to push him away.

“Get away from me!” I screamed, shoving Vincent’s hand away from my back.

Tears streamed down my face as I struggled to hold onto the last remnants of control I had left. “This is your fault!”

“Grace, please.” Vincent pleaded, his voice filled with remorse.

“You knew Lucas had problems, and you didn’t stop?” I asked in desperation, my voice trembling with anger and heartbreak. “When you found out he was taking them, did you stop selling right away?”

Vincent didn’t answer. The silence between us was deafening as the weight of my anger and disappointment hung heavy in the air.

I felt like I didn’t know who this person was anymore. The thought that he could be capable of such a thing made me

physically ill.

I don't know him.

"You set him up to fail!" I screamed, my voice shaking with rage, feeling the heat of anger rush through my veins.

I hated that he was around me right now. I was disgusted as I looked at Vincent, who appeared composed and unaffected, while I was a mess on the bathroom floor. The bond we shared was meant to bring us closer together, but at this moment, it only made me feel more trapped.

It tried to wrap around me, forcing me to feel his emotions. To feel his faint echo of remorse and guilt that was trying to make it past Vincent's wall that was back up.

For the first time, I hated the bond.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, his voice barely above a whisper.

"It isn't me you need to apologize to!" I sobbed, my voice trembling with emotion. "Lucas, our circle member, is lying in a hospital bed because of the drugs you sell."

"I didn't know he took it," Vincent defended himself, "I've always kept a close eye on him and hid my stash, always."

"Well done," I sneered, my voice filled with sarcasm and anger. "What a great show demonstrating how you care."

I pushed myself up from the floor, the world still spinning, but my determination to get as far away from him as possible drove me forward. The bond between us pulsed with his guilt and shame, but it fueled my anger further.

Vincent blocked my path, “Grace, I swear to you, I never sold to Lucas!”

“But you exposed him to it, right?” I shook my head in disbelief, unable to understand why he would do such a thing. “What could you possibly gain from selling drugs? It’s not like you need the money.”

The hurt and confusion I felt were in the air, the bond between us pulsing with the moment’s tension.

His silence was deafening. His guilt pressed down on both of us. Once strong and unbreakable, the bond between us now pulsed with his shame and my anger. I took a step back, needing space from him.

Tears streamed down my face as I took another step back, my voice shaking as I spoke.

“I can’t do this right now. My focus needs to be solely on Lucas and his recovery. It’s the only thing that matters right now.”

Lucas’ recovery should be the first thing on my mind, I thought to myself.

“Okay,” Vincent said, his tone heavy with defeat.

“Okay,” I nodded, feeling exhausted both physically and emotionally.

Vincent quietly turned, leaving the bathroom, but his body stiffened as soon as he opened the door.

“Shit! fuck! fuck!” he cursed, slamming the door shut and turning to face me, his hands gripping my arms tightly, forcing me to look into his eyes. “Grace, There is a cop outside, he’s probably going to question you, but you can’t say anything. You hear me.”

“You want me to lie to a police officer?” I asked, my voice going high with shock.

“If you tell, it will cause a lot of issues for us.”

“For us? You mean, for you?” I said, pulling away from his grasp, the anger rising within me.

“Please, Grace,” he begged, his eyes pleading with mine. “I know I’ve done wrong, but I promise, it will only make things worse if you tell the truth.”

I could see his desperation and fear of what could happen if I told the truth. Then, as the worst-case scenarios ran through my mind, I suddenly realized something.

“Vincent, the bag!” I whispered in panic.

Vincent’s eyes widened with alarm, and he quickly ran out the door, muttering curses.

Wiping my face, I quickly checked myself in the mirror before venturing into the waiting room.

As I entered, I was met by the sight of Vincent, standing tall and defiant with his arms crossed over his chest, sneering with sarcasm and disdain. His towering figure blocked my view as he challenged the officer.

“You have some nerve showing up here. I know the doctors don’t inform the police,” he spat out the words, his tone heavy with bitterness.

“News travels fast in this town, and when I found out it was Apollo, I had to come,” the officer’s voice spoke with a cool firmness, contrasting with Vincent’s hostility.

I recognized that voice. It was the same one I had heard on the phone two days ago.

*Was this officer Cody?*

Peeking around Vincent, I was shocked to see a familiar face dressed in a navy-blue uniform instead of the rough brown leather jacket I had seen before. This was the same man who had watched us on mine and Vincent’s date.

*What was happening?*

“From the kindness of your own heart, right?” Vincent’s voice dripped with skepticism as he spat out the words.

“I am genuinely worried,” the officer replied, his tone carrying a hint of frustration. “I have a fondness for the lad, and it concerns me that every time Apollo ends up here, you’re always by his bedside.” The officer’s gaze was intense, studying Vincent’s every move as he spoke, trying to decipher the truth behind his words.

“What are you implying?” Vincent growled, his fists clenched at his sides as he stepped forward, his anger and frustration palpable.

“Just asking questions,” the officer shrugged nonchalantly, but I could sense a hint of amusement in his eyes that only served to fuel Vincent’s rage.

“We both know why you’re digging around here, officer.” Vincent sneered, his voice filled with bitterness. “You’re not a detective, just a small-town cop with too much time on your hands.”

Officer Cody simply smiled, “People with too much time on their hands can be dangerous, don’t you think?” He then turned his gaze to me, “Miss Millington, if I recall correctly. We spoke on the phone a few days ago.”

“She has nothing to do with this!” Vincent growled, placing himself between Officer Cody and me.

“Is that so?” Officer Cody asked, his tone filled with skepticism.

“If you think you can intimidate her into saying something you want to be true-” Vincent began.

“I’m many things, Vincent,” Officer Cody said, his voice calm and collected, “but I am no bully. She’s Mr. Moore’s circle member. She’s more involved than you at this point.” And with that, he stepped to the side, approaching me.

But Vincent easily moved to block him again, his muscles tensed, ready for a confrontation.

Officer Cody gave a sigh, his expression turning to one of pity. “I’m not your enemy, Vincent. I know someone has been recruiting the mundane. I know there are drugs hidden here.”



“I don’t see what your speculations have to do with us, officer.”

But Officer Cody simply sighed heavily, his expression one of sadness. “When I find the truth. I hope to god that you’re not involved.”

Vincent remained silent as Cody approached me, ignoring the bag on the nearby chair.

“Miss Millington, I’m truly sorry that we have to meet under these circumstances,” Cody said, his voice tinged with regret. “Have you heard any updates on Lucas’s condition?”

“We’re still waiting for the results of the tests,” I replied, trying to keep my voice steady.

“I’m praying for the best,” Cody said, a small but genuine smile spreading across his face. “I wasn’t lying when I said I am fond of Apollo. But I understand you’ve had a long day, so let’s try to wrap this up quickly, okay?” He offered me a warm smile like a comforting cup of hot cocoa, spreading ease through my body and relaxing my tense shoulders.

I nodded, unable to tear my gaze away from the fuming Vincent. But Cody’s soft cough brought me back to the present, and he gave me another gentle smile.

“Good. Now, I want you to know that I won’t be arresting Lucas. He has immunity under the law and is protected, but I still have the right to question him if I suspect he or any witnesses are involved in trafficking any illegal substances.”

I couldn’t help but glance nervously at Vincent.

*Did the police know something about him?*

Vincent's piercing gaze locked onto mine, sending shivers down my spine and causing the room to spin. I felt a wave of dizziness wash over me as if I were about to faint.

Officer Cody noticed my reaction and followed my gaze to Vincent. A flicker of recognition crossed his face, and he turned his attention to Vincent. "Why were you in town during lunch hour on that Saturday, Miss Millington?"

Vincent's anger boiled over as he stepped closer to me, his voice sharp. "That has nothing to do with this so-called case!"

Cody's eyes sparkled with amusement. "Ah, I see some of Sebastian in you. He also used to get a bit ruffled when things didn't go his way at school. Are you following in your older brother's footsteps and becoming a criminal defense lawyer?"

"Don't insult me," Vincent growled, his face dark with anger.

Cody quickly held up his hands in apology. "You're right. I went too far. I apologize." He turned his attention back to me. "From the file, it looks like you found Lucas roughly one month ago. Yet I saw you with Mr. Gushiken just a week ago. Can you explain that?"

I blinked, taken aback by hearing Vincent's last name. It just further cemented how much I didn't know him.

"I have a file?" I asked, my voice trembling.

"Apollo has a file," Cody explained. "I was his case manager when he arrived here for treatment for his leg a year

and a half ago.”

My gaze naturally turned to Vincent as I took in his expression at the mention of Lucas’ injury. Despite his cool and collected exterior, I could sense a hint of pain and anger in his eyes.

“Of course, I made one for everyone that could be a suspect or a connection.” Officer Cody continued to add. Even with his warm smile, I could feel the double-edge threat, but I sensed it wasn’t towards me.

“Suspect for what?” I asked, my voice trembling with a mixture of fear and confusion. My mind raced with questions, wondering what Officer Cody knew that he wasn’t telling me.

As Cody shifted his gaze toward Vincent, I felt a sense of unease wash over me.

*Why was he looking at Vincent like that?*

“This town isn’t as nice and quiet as it may seem,” Cody said in a hushed tone as if he didn’t want anyone else to know the truth,

“Do we need to look into a lawyer, Cody?” Vincent’s voice was incredibly frosty. He shifted closer to us, his body poised as if ready to leap to my defense.

“That won’t be necessary. I don’t think either of us could handle Sabastian at this moment in time.” Cody replied.

“Grace has just moved here. She doesn’t need to hear your conspiracy theories.”

Ignoring Vincent, Officer Cody focused his attention solely on me. He handed me a business card and said, “Like I told Apollo and Vincent, you can call me day or night if you have any information.”

I slowly took the card, my hand shaking as I looked down at the number. I couldn’t shake the feeling that there was much more to this town.

“Give all my best to Apollo. Again, I’m sorry for officially meeting you under these circumstances.” He gave a nod with a sad smile before turning to Vincent, “Vincent.” He nodded before taking his leave.

“Why Vincent?” I questioned, my voice thick with emotion. Anger and frustration boiled inside me, but they were swallowed up as a wave of exhaustion crashed into me, causing me to slump into one of the uncomfortable waiting room chairs.

Vincent attempted to comfort me, sitting down beside me. “Grace-”

“No!” I interjected, my voice rising with each word, “I’m not listening to you until you tell me the whole truth. I lied for you! To the police! Lucas died, Vincent!”

Vincent’s face grew tight at the reminder as he replied, “Lucas is going to be fine.”

“He isn’t fine!” I cried out, my voice shaking. “I’m not fine! None of us are fine! How can things ever be okay again?” I

felt the tears streaming down my face, the weight of our loss bearing down on me like a heavy burden.

I sobbed uncontrollably, the weight of the past few days finally crashing down.

Vincent reached out to touch my shoulder, but I shrugged him off. I didn't want to be touched. I felt too exposed, too raw, and too vulnerable. I longed to sleep for a long time.

Vincent sat quietly, his eyes fixed on the floor as I cried, the guilt etched all over his face. I was grateful for his silence, as I felt I would explode if he offered any excuses.

We sat together, in silence, in the sterile hospital waiting room, surrounded by the monotonous hum of medical equipment and hushed whispers. Every time the door to Lucas' room opened, my heart leaped in my chest, only to sink again when a nurse or doctor emerged instead.

I was consumed by worry and guilt, reliving the moments leading up to this moment over and over again in my mind.

*Lucas died...*

The door to Lucas' room creaked open yet again, and a doctor emerged, his expression impassive as he walked towards us. I felt every muscle in my body tense as I braced myself for the worst possible news.

"He's stable for now," the doctor announced, his words slicing through the tense silence like a razor-sharp blade. "We've managed to lower his heart rate and blood pressure, but he's going to undergo an MRI scan."

I clutched my chest in distress, my mind racing. “What? What are you looking for?”

The doctor cast me a patient gaze. “We have found that Mr. Moore may have suffered a seizure from the substance he ingested. We want to check if there is any brain damage.”

“Will he be okay?” I whispered, my voice breaking with fear.

The doctor sighed, his face etched with a look of compassion. “We won’t know for certain until we receive the test results, but I assure you we’re doing everything in our power to help him.”

The words barely registered. My heart was heavy with fear. It felt like things would never be okay again. I couldn’t bear the thought of losing Lucas, of never seeing him smile or hearing his laughter again.

“I felt...” The bond halted my next words. “When he...”

The doctor nodded sympathetically, his eyes soft with understanding. “Experiencing your circle member dying is a horribly traumatic experience. We have a therapist if you need someone to talk to.”

“Can I see Lucas?”

I didn’t want to talk. I just needed Lucas. All I wanted was to be near Lucas, to feel his warmth and hold his hand. To continue to hold his soul and keep it safe.

“Of course, you’re welcome to wait in the room we will put him in. It will calm you both, I assume.” He gave me a gentle

smile before I turned to Vincent in question, but the doctor beat me to it. “I’m sorry, I can only allow his circle members and family at this point.”

My breath hitched as I looked at Vincent, begging him to come with me. Lucas needed him. I needed him.

Vincent refused to look at me, and it broke my heart. An icy bolt right in the center, twisting it for more damage.

His eyes finally met mine, and I saw the guilt in him. It was like a physical burden, making it hard for him to breathe. But even with his obvious distress, I saw the moist gleam in his eyes.

I knew what he wasn’t saying at that moment.

*I’m sorry...*

He wasn’t going to reveal that he was a member of Lucas’s inner circle, and he wasn’t going to come with me.

My eyes closed, trying to stop the tears as hot rage burned inside me.

I wanted to burn Vincent at that moment. I wanted his pain, his agony, to suffer alongside me.

I could feel the smooth wet barrier around us and burnt it without remorse. I sent my thoughts to him like a bullet.

Vincent stumbled as the force of my thoughts hit him, his breath coming out in ragged gasps as he tried to hold back the sounds of his agony.

“Grace.” Vincent choked out. Begging as he gasped for breath, only for each pull of air to send a dagger of pain to his cold heart.

But I wouldn't listen to him. I turned away, leaving Vincent to face his own choices, closing the door behind me.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### GRACE

*A loud ringing erupted in my ears. The world around me felt slow and foggy, but something was pulling at my chest. Turning, I saw Vincent kneeling on the ground in front of me, his body pushing up and down like he was pumping up a bike tire.*

*What was he doing? I wondered, drifting closer.*

*But my heart went cold. He wasn't pumping a pump. Instead, a body was on the floor. It looked like a rag doll, lying there, unbreathing, unseeing.*

*"Vincent?" My voice wobbled, echoing around the large room.*

*"Don't just stand there!" Vincent spat angrily, still continuously pressing down on the body's chest, "Help me!"*

*Looking down at the body, I noticed the familiar blonde hair. Lucas's blue eyes unblinkingly stared upwards, looking at nothing. It was then I noticed the soul piece I had in my chest was ice cold, dead.*

*“Lucas!”*

I jolted upwards from my chair, my heart racing as I frantically looked over at Lucas. The sight of his chest rising and falling steadily as he slept on the hospital bed. The dim light cast the room in shadows, the humming machines and steady beeping in time with Lucas's heart. A small tug in my chest made me take notice of his growing flame inside me, flickering with each breath he took.

It brought a sense of relief that washed over me, calming my racing heartbeat.

It hadn't been that long since they rolled Lucas back in here. The doctors had pieced together what had happened. He had a seizure from his overdose, followed by choking on his own vomit. Thankfully Lucas's brain scan came out clear.

Vincent had saved his life, while I had frozen in fear, unable to act.

I couldn't shake the guilt that consumed me, knowing I would carry the burden of that moment for the rest of my life.

As I took a moment to gather my thoughts, I suddenly realized that I wasn't alone in the hospital room. A gasp escaped my lips as my gaze fell upon a stranger in the corner, a large man with piercing black eyes that narrowed as he noticed me. The scar running down his right cheek sent a shiver of recognition down my spine. He screamed trouble from his leather jacket to his black boots with metal clasps. His hair was long and pulled to the side poorly.

*I've seen him before.*

My gaze flickered to Lucas, wanting to ensure he was okay, but my instincts refused to look away from the stranger as I slowly stood up.

“Who are you?” I stammered my voice barely above a whisper. I desperately tried not to show I was searching for the alarm button. Something in my body knew he was bad news. I didn’t know if it was the menacing scar running down his cheek or how he was outright glaring at me once he noticed I was awake.

“Where’s the stash?” His voice was deep, a menacing rumble echoing through the room, leaving me shaken to the core. My heart raced as I watched him slowly approach me, his annoyance etched into every line of his face. His biker boots clacking against the tile floor were like a drumbeat of dread, drawing closer and closer.

I cast my mind back, trying to remember if Lucas had ever mentioned this stranger’s name, but all I could recall was the nearly explosive confrontation between them at the party last month. All my unhelpful mind could remember was that he was a Mundane and that he was so incredibly angry.

“How did you get in?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. This was supposed to be a secure location, but now it felt like a trap.

*Wasn't there meant to be security?*

“The stash, sweetness.” He demanded, prowling closer, which reminded me of a male lion, and I was most definitely the prey here.

I could feel my panic rising but I knew I had to keep it together.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I tried to keep my voice firm like my knees weren’t knocking against each other.

“Oh really?” His cold, dark chuckle sent shivers down my spine. He looked down at Lucas, his expression unreadable, before turning back to me with a sinister smile. “You think I’m stupid?”

I shook my head, my back pressed against the wall as I tried to distance myself from the stranger.

“Tell me where it is, or your lover-boy here will have a hell of a wake-up call,” he threatened, his voice growing louder with each passing moment. The sound of it echoed through the room.

“Wait,” I whispered, following him, stepping closer. I swallowed my frantic panic as I tried to think of a plan.

First, I needed to get him away from Lucas.

After a brief moment, as my head raced to think, the guy’s annoyance hit another level when his lips curled in a silent snarl.

“I can get it for you,” I said, the words tumbling out of my mouth, “But it’s not here.”

A wave of relief washed over me as I remembered that I had placed the bag in my car, eager to get it as far away from me as possible.

The man sneered, his lips curling into a snarl. “Funny how you didn’t know what I was talking about just a second ago.” He loomed closer, his massive stature making me feel extremely small. Lucas and Vincent were tall, but this guy was huge.

“I’ll take you to it.” But, despite my best effort to sound confident, I could hear the fear in my voice.

“You better not be leading me on a goose chase, sweetness,” he growled, following me out of the room like a looming shadow of doom.

Going into the waiting room, I was disappointed to see my parents weren’t back yet. They had gone home to gather a few items.

It was the early hours of the morning, and the hospital was unnervingly quiet and dim. The sounds of our footsteps echoed down the halls. The atmosphere was eerie. It felt like a ghost town, with only the occasional nurse rushing past us, breaking the stillness. They were focused on their duties, unaware of my discomfort with the stranger behind me.

My anger at Vincent only grew with each step as I had a sneaking suspicion that he knew this guy better than Lucas did. But I hadn’t seen him since the moment I turned my back.

*Coward!*

Was I doing the right thing? I felt I had no choice but to give this guy what he demanded. But would that cause Lucas more trouble?

The chill of the early morning air seeped into my bones as I entered the hospital parking lot. I approached my car and opened the passenger side door, still afraid. I retrieved the bag, but the stranger immediately took it from me and began to search through its contents.

Inside, he found numerous bags filled with white powder, remnants of Lucas's addiction.

The very thing that nearly killed him.

*It did kill him...*

The stranger ignored me as his finger went over one of the plastic bags, opened one, and dipped his pinky finger inside, covering his nail in white before rubbing it against his upper gums and spitting it on the ground below.

I wished I'd thrown it all down the toilet.

"Fucking, JD." He cursed while shoving the rest back into the bag, but he didn't give it back to me. Instead, his black eyes burned into me, and his gaze traveled up and down my body, freezing me like I was his prey.

"I wonder how a little *soulstealer* like you got this?"

I flinched at the slur.

I'd heard it before, shouted on the city streets but never had it directed at me. It was a term that Mundane often used towards us with circles. A hateful word that made what was a wonderful experience of holding our soulmate's soul inside us into something wrong and abnormal.

“I found it,” I said, feeling the need to defend Lucas. I didn’t want him to get in trouble.

“You’re lying.” He stated, slowly stepping towards me. “I know for a fact this bundle here was stolen.”

*Stolen? My god Lucas what the hell did you do?*

“How do you know it wasn’t me that stole it?” I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

He let out a short, gruff laugh, shaking his head. The scar on his cheek only served to sharpen his smile. “Did you steal it, pretty bird?” he asked, his lips pulling upwards. “Did you steal from Samson?”

Samson. Vincent worked for him too.

*Did they work together?*

I stumbled backwards, hitting my back against my car as the stranger closed in on me.

“I...I...” I stuttered as the reality of my situation came crashing down on me. I was alone with a stranger, and no one knew where I was. No one was around either, and by the glint in his dark eyes, the stranger knew it too.

“I’ve always wondered if it’s true that you soulstealers can feel each other’s pain and lies? Would you all still be together if you didn’t have that to rely on?” His wrist flicked to the side, clicking out a pocket knife.

He stepped closer, his hot, spicy breath a stark contrast to the cold metal of the knife against my cheek. He was so quick



I didn't have time to react.

I was frozen, unable to look away or even blink as his black eyes burned into mine. I felt the coldness of the knife tracing it along my skin, following the exact path of his own scar. No sting of cutting flesh burned into my skin like I expected. Instead, I felt the knife traced along my skin with a delicate touch, almost as if it were a strange lover's caress rather than a threat.

"Do you regret having Apollo in your circle?" he whispered as if we were having a normal conversation. "You people always fascinate me. Like, if one of your circle members was a murderer, would you still love them?" The knife was still pressed against my cheek, reminding me he had control over me.

"I don't regret Lucas," I forced out, trying to hide the fear in my voice. My heart was pounding in my chest, the fear inside me like a vise grip.

He gave a short chuckle, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Brainwashed. That's all you lot are," he muttered before taking a step back and gracefully flicking his knife back into his pocket. The amusement was still on his face, like he found me one big joke.

*Was my fear a game to him?*

I clutched my chest, trying to calm my panicked breathing as I processed what had just happened. It was so quick, and if

it wasn't for my racing heart, I would have thought I had imagined it.

“Jaxson!” Vincent’s voice was a relief, a beacon of hope in a moment of terror.

The stranger, Jaxson, turned to face Vincent with a callous smile spreading across his face. Vincent approached us with a face of fury, his fists tight at his sides and his eyes blazing like molten metal.

“Vincent,” Jaxson purred, his smile slow and callous. “I was wondering where you were lurking around.”

“What the hell are you doing here?” Vincent growled, easily stepping into Jaxson’s personal space. Despite Vincent’s impressive height, Jaxson was thicker, meaner, and all-around more intimidating.

“Just doing my job,” Jaxson replied with a raised eyebrow, brandishing the bag in his hand. “And a better one than you, I might add.” The smugness in his voice was almost insufferable.

Vincent didn’t even spare the bag a glance. His full attention locked onto Jaxson, who continued to grin widely.

“Apollo was the one who had it, after all. What was it that you said? Oh, that’s right, ‘I’ve checked, he doesn’t have it, and he knows he’s blacklisted anyway and wouldn’t dare.’” Jaxson gave a mocking laugh, “Looks like you were wrong, Vincent.”

Vincent remained silent. I could feel him shaking but not from fear. I felt the cold storm that was brewing inside him. It sent my inside's spiraling with frost. If I breathed out, you would be able to see the vapors.

"Now, because of your arrogance, you've got the boys in blue sniffing around him. I think Samson isn't going to be too pleased with you," Jaxson sneered, enjoying that he had something over Vincent's head.

"I will pay Samson back," Vincent responded firmly, his jaw set in determination.

"Why would you pay for someone who stole from us?" Jaxson asked, eyebrows raised.

Vincent's jaw jumped, "Like you said, I got too arrogant, JD was under me, and he lost it in the first place. All of this is my responsibility."

"It's good to see you're actually human and make mistakes like the rest of us mortals," Jaxson said with a hint of sarcasm and a smirk playing at the corners of his mouth.

"We all have our faults." Vincent muttered before his expression turned ice-cold, "But jealousy still isn't a good look on you."

Jaxson let out a growl that seemed to come from deep within him and took a menacing step forward, making it seem like he was about to unleash a barrage of punches on Vincent, but a flicker of hesitation appeared on his face. He seemed to

struggle with his emotions, holding himself back from lashing out.

“I just can’t wait till Samson finally sees that you’re not this perfect guy he believes you to be.” Jaxson’s voice was all growl, his teeth bared with his smile.

“You would still be second to me in his eyes,” Vincent said coolly. He looked completely unaffected by the dominating aggressive Mundane, but I felt the coldness in my chest pulsing to the beat of my heart.

“And her?” Jaxson asked, tilting his head in my direction, his dark eyes seeming to soak me in, causing a shiver to run down my spine as I felt like I was the weaker target in this encounter. “What should we do with her?”

“She is Apollo’s circle member but doesn’t understand anything,” Vincent said, standing steadfast.

“Then you better keep her updated. Otherwise, Samson could turn his eyes on her as retaliation if he can’t reach Apollo.” His dark eyes soaked me in, causing a shiver to run down my spine. “Would be a shame.”

“Leave,” Vincent sneered, exuding his own icy anger. “You’ve found the bag. Take it to Samson, and I’ll face the consequences.”

“Interesting,” Jaxson said with a smirk as he looked back and forth between Vincent and me. “See you around, sweetness,” he said, sauntering off towards a motorcycle I had seen before, relishing the tension he had created.

“I’ve seen him before,” I muttered, my voice barely above a whisper while we both watched Jaxson pull away with a loud roar from his motorbike, leaving behind a cloud of dust and a sense of foreboding.

A motorbike I’d seen before on my first day at school

“Are you okay?” Vincent asked once. Jaxson turned at the corner bend, going out of sight.

I nodded, trying to keep upright. The ground felt like it was slipping beneath my feet. These last two days were getting to me, and I struggled to process everything.

“You avoid him at all costs.” Vincent snapped, his voice filled with urgency, “You see him on the street, go the other way, fucking run. Do you understand me, Grace?”

“You both work for Samson?” I asked, my voice shaking.

Vincent nodded solemnly, his eyes fixed on mine. “Samson likes to hire Mundanes, people who have nothing and no one else. It gives him more loyal soldiers and power,” he explained, his voice low and serious.

“So Officer Cody was right,” I whispered, feeling a deep sense of unease wash over me as the reality of the situation settled in.

“Cody is going to get in trouble if he continues to look into this,” Vincent warned, his eyes flicking toward the hospital entrance. The seriousness in his tone made my heart skip a beat.

“And you?” I asked, fear and concern making my voice tremble. “Will you be getting into trouble? Because what I just heard didn’t sound good at all.”

“I will be fine,” Vincent said dismissively, brushing off my concerns as he began to walk towards the hospital entrance.

I was still trying to wrap my head around the fact that one of my circle members was involved in a criminal organization.

*‘If one of your circle members was a murderer, would you still love them?’* Jaxson’s words drifted over me like a ghost sending shivers down my spine.

“What did he mean by retaliation?” I asked, my voice rising in alarm. The fear of the unknown was creeping into me, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that Vincent was hiding something from me that could put him in harm’s way. After all we had gone through, he still kept secrets from me.

“It’s fine, Grace. You don’t have to worry.” He brushed me aside, turning away from me.

“Vincent.” I grabbed his arm, pulling him to face me. “I’ve been allowing you both to dance around your secrets. But I’m done with it all. You promised me honesty!”

“I also promised to do anything to keep our circle safe and protected,” he replied stoically, his voice flat and unyielding.

“Should I remind you that Lucas is in a hospital bed?” I snapped back, tears welling in my eyes. “He is in a hospital bed you refused to visit!” My voice rose with each word, my

emotions taking over as I confronted Vincent about his lack of action.

Lucas and I needed him, and he refused to take that step. Was this so-called protection worth the pain from his actions? At this moment, it didn't feel worth it.

All of the hurt, the betrayal, the fear, and the uncertainty were churning inside me, fighting for control. It was like a storm raging inside me, and Vincent was caught in the eye of it. I needed him to understand how I was feeling, to see the pain and frustration that he had caused.

Vincent's eyes were downcast, avoiding my gaze as if he couldn't bear to look me in the eye. But I didn't need to see into his eyes to see his pain. His face was etched with lines of regret, and his voice was heavy with sadness.

"I understand why you're upset, Grace," he said softly. "I really do. But the situation is more complicated than you think."

The frustration and anger bubbled inside me, and I struggled to keep my voice steady as I spoke through gritted teeth. "Then explain it to me!"

Vincent's expression was heavy with exhaustion and regret. His eyes looked tired and bloodshot, but a hardened blank erupted on his face as he turned towards me, stepping close. "Fine, you want it all, then here it is."

His eyes burned with anger and frustration, but I sensed it wasn't directed at me. A seething, icy fury boiled just beneath

the surface, and I could feel it crackling like lightning. I had felt this same emotion before with Lucas, and it made me shiver with a deep, bone-chilling dread.

“I didn’t want you to know about any of this,” Vincent said, his voice tight with emotion. “When Lucas found you, I panicked. I thought I had time to sort things out, to prepare to leave this behind. But each time it came to leave, I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t leave when Lucas got involved, and I couldn’t leave for you, either. I hesitated again and again.” He paused, his hand trembling as he rubbed his eyes wearily. “I fucked up big time, and now this happened. I never wanted you to know who I was and what I do- stupid as that is.”

“Why couldn’t you leave?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. I needed something, anything, to hold onto to explain all of this.

Vincent sighed heavily, his hand dropping from his face to rest limply at his side. “It was meant to be temporary. My brother is Samson’s lawyer and suggested me for some jobs.”

“Why would he get you involved in this?” I asked, horrified.

“I told you before about the importance of my family. My brother strives for money and power. It wasn’t surprising that he would use me to further his gain.” He looked up at me with a solemn expression. “I’m not a good person, Grace. I’ve done shady stuff and....” He closed his eyes with a grimace, “I’ve hurt people,” he admitted quietly.



I swallowed hard, my throat feeling tight with emotion before I forced the question out. “What did you do?”

He continued speaking, either ignoring my question or, now that the dam had finally collapsed, he couldn't stop pouring out everything he'd been keeping inside. “I was supposed to be just a standard runner at first. It wasn't meant to be more. Just a month, filling in before he could get someone else. But Samson saw how reliable I was. I liked problem-solving, and he took me under his wing.” Vincent explained, his words heavy with regret. “I know it's not an excuse, but I was young and stupid, and I didn't realize what I was getting into at first.”

A tight grasp stuck to me as my breath left my body. The realization hit me- Vincent wasn't a good guy. I knew then the real reason why he avoided me. He wanted me blind to all of this, so I didn't see what he truly was.

“Vincent, what did you do?” I asked again, my voice barely above a whisper.

“You have to see, Grace, I am trapped in this web.” He explained desperately. His eyes were wide with fear and pain, and his body shook. I could see the turmoil inside him, the weight of his guilt almost too much to bear.

I felt the black ice that resided there like it was in my own chest. It left me breathless, stuck in place as a looming doom was felt behind me. My heart was pounding, and a cold sweat broke across my forehead.

“Who did you hurt, Vincent?” My voice was trembling, barely audible.

A smog of cold fumes wrapped around us then. A strange combination of the crisp cold mixed with the polluted air of car fumes, it was Vincent's painful regret. It twisted sharply, making us both inhale harshly.

There could be only one thing for him to react this way.

No...

The realization punched me in the stomach, and the reality of that made me physically step back away from him.

"Lucas... You hurt Lucas." I felt my insides shrivel as he nodded. The picture of his burnt leg came to mind. "His leg..." The image made me sick to my stomach, and I had to fight the urge to vomit.

"I did it." He couldn't even look at me. His head was bowed, his shoulders hunched in shame.

"Oh god," I couldn't look at him as nausea hit me. "Why?" I asked through the ringing that was in my head.

"I found out he was one of my four."

"So, you burnt him?" I spat out, baffled, as my hands balled into fists.

"Samson wanted Apollo to pay, and he chose me to set his order in motion. I was only meant to scare him, but as soon as I punched him, I felt the connection-"

"And you hurt him!" My voice cracked, and tears started to flow down my face. The pain and betrayal I felt were almost too much to bear.

The bond coiled away with disgust, lashing at him for doing something so violating. You weren't meant to hurt your circle. Because if you did, the pain you would suffer would be constant till you fixed whatever you hurt.

*Vincent's block...*

My body tilted to the side, threatening to topple over as more and more secrets came to the surface.

"I had no choice," he said, desperation creeping into his voice. "What Samson wanted for Lucas would have been much crueler."

"And this is how you justify it? Do you sleep better at night thinking that?" I asked, my voice heavy with disgust and disappointment.

*What did Lucas do to ever get this reaction?*

'He stole something from me,' Vincent had mentioned about Lucas on our date. Jaxson said something similar that he stole the bag,

Vincent stiffened before finally turning to me, glaring. "I don't justify it. But at that time, it was the best outcome."

The best outcome? How could he even say that?

My hands clenched tighter, making my nails dig into the palms of my hands while I struggled to keep my emotions in check. "How could you say that? Lucas is in our circle, and you scarred him. You scarred him for life!"

Vincent growled with frustration. His eyes were wild, his hair disheveled, and his hands shook with anger. “You don’t understand. Samson wanted him dead.”

I glared back at him, refusing to back down. “You’re right. I don’t understand because I’m not a part of that life, Vincent.”

He grabbed at his hair, pulling at it in frustration. “And I tried to keep you out of it! Do you think I didn’t know how you would react to this? I didn’t want you to know we were part of a circle. It was risky enough that Lucas found you, but the selfish ass had to mess all that up!”

I felt a surge of protectiveness for Lucas, my heart pounding with anger towards Vincent for blaming him. “Don’t you dare blame Lucas,” I hissed, my voice shaking with emotion.

“Why shouldn’t I? It’s the truth. None of this would have happened if you were still in the dark about all of this,” Vincent shot back, his eyes blazing with frustration.

I shook my head, unable to see his reasoning. It was pure madness. Didn’t he see how blinded he was? My fists clenched at my sides, my body tense with anger.

“So what? You would still be going around dealing drugs like it’s nothing. Lucas would still have a drug problem, and his leg would still be scarred. We would still be here, Vincent,” I spat out, the words dripping with bitterness.

“No, if both of you just listened to me, none of this would have happened.” Vincent retorted, his voice growing louder.

I scoffed, feeling the blood rise to my cheeks. “If you never *‘helped’* this Samson guy, Lucas would never have gotten injured.”

“He consented that night. I gave him the choices, and he picked. Lucas understands that side of life. He got his toes wet while I was in the vast ocean getting deeper and deeper. And trust me when I say this, Grace, it is much easier to leave the ocean shore than the ocean bed. Someone always has to make these hard choices!”

I shook my head, unable to register his words, “No, you’re just trying to help yourself.” I said the words before it all clicked into place, “All of this, what you’re saying and doing. It’s all been for you. None of this was about us. It’s all been what you want.”

“Grace, please.” he pleaded, his voice softening. “You got it all wrong.” He took a step towards me, but I backed away.

The pain and betrayal I felt were almost too much to bear, and I couldn’t stomach looking at him.

“No, I don’t think I have. You said it yourself that you are what your family raised you to be. Your own brother even offered you up for his own gain. So why wouldn’t you do the same to your circle?”

I felt the weight of my words as soon as they left my lips, like a lead weight that landed heavily on my chest. Vincent’s expression changed, going from hurt to cold and distant instantly. The warmth in his eyes vanished, leaving behind a hard, impenetrable barrier that seemed to shut me out

completely. Vincent's shoulders dropped, and the air around us grew heavy with palpable tension. It was like a switch had been flipped, and he was suddenly shut off from me. Guarding himself, withdrawing into his own world where nobody could touch him.

Because Vincent only relied on himself.

"You win, Vincent." I continued, needing him to see what his actions had done to his circle. "You get whatever you want now. I'm done with whatever you're currently going through. I won't allow you to dictate our circle or me anymore because I'm done."

"If that is what you want." Vincent's voice was an emotionless wall. The cold detachment hurt, but being pushed aside hurt even more.

I could live with this pain.

I let out an unhumorous huff of a laugh while shaking my head at him, "This was never what I wanted."

*But it's what I needed.*

If Vincent wanted that kind of life, he was free to live it, but I wouldn't follow. My parents had always strived for me to be my own person, and I had to admit I had felt so incredibly lost during the past month since I had found Lucas and Vincent. I had lost myself, and there was only so much I could take, and I was at my wit's end. I had tried to help us all, but I was trying to help someone who didn't want it. Vincent said it himself - he had a chance to change, and he didn't.

As I turned to leave and go back to Lucas, Vincent quickly grabbed my arm, stopping me. I braced myself for his denial or pleading, but he did neither to justify himself.

“Just don’t give up on Lucas.” Vincent whispered, “He can get better, so please don’t turn your back on him because of me.”

I jerked my arm out of his grip, “Don’t worry. I think my words would sting less than your lack of commitment to us.” I said before walking away from him.

I could feel the bond between us trying to hold on, begging me to stay and work things out, but I couldn’t do it anymore. I was done with all the drama and the chaos.

But as much as I tried to ignore it, our bond was still there, tugging at my heartstrings. It was a constant reminder that he would always be within me no matter how far I walked away from Vincent.

I knew something needed to change.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### LUCAS

The low continuous beep was starting to irritate me. Every time I thought it had stopped, it went off again, and with each breath I took, the beeping went louder and quicker. It was taunting me, and I wasn't in the mood. I just wanted to sleep, but that fucking beep was driving me insane and stopping me from enjoying the most peaceful sleep I've had in a long time.

My mouth felt thick and greasy, parching my throat like I had just chugged a whole bottle of oil. A strange ache rumbled in my stomach. I felt it coiling, warning me of the impending pain if I dared to move. With no choice, I laid there on my back, feeling raw and vulnerable, like a wounded animal on what felt like itchy, rough sheets. It felt horrible against my skin. Even with my eyes closed, I could feel the room spinning, making the nausea I was currently feeling rise.

*Shit, did I crash on a round-a-bout at the kid's park again?*

Another beep went off, and with an annoyed huff, I slowly tried to move away from the annoying sound. It was then I



realized that my limbs were weighed down by a cold stream running down my right arm. I struggled to move it again, but it felt heavy, strange, and extremely itchy.

Was it wrapped? Bandaged?

“Lucas?” A voice called out to me. It brought me out of the dark, which I wanted to dwell in.

*Grace?*

My throat burned. I could feel it travel up my throat, bringing an acid flare straight onto my tongue. Then I noticed that the familiar metal ball that normally rested on my tongue was missing.

A huff came from above, “I assure you I am not Grace.”

Yeah, the voice wasn't right. It was too deep to be my Grace's. Her voice was soft and gentle. Was it Vincent?

Trying to open my eyes was a challenge. They wouldn't open. It was like they were sealed shut, which made everything else more noticeable.

The beep was louder, and the bed I was lying on felt stiff and off-putting, unlike my own or Grace's. My left arm was indeed wrapped tightly, and my index finger felt a slight pinch. My stomach ached with every attempt at curling myself into a ball as my head felt like it was being electrocuted for just being alive.

This was one of the worst hangovers I've ever had.

*How much did I drink last night?*

I tried to move, but my body was too heavy. It was like I was trapped, a prisoner in my own body, and the thought was terrifying. Panic started to set in as I realized I couldn't even lift a finger.

“Easy.” The voice tried to calm me down. I felt a large hand grip my shoulder, holding me down and keeping me still.

“Fuck.” My throat burned, turning my voice into a gargled mess. It was like I had swallowed hot coals. For once in my life, my body was trying to get me to shut up, but the pain made me want to scream even more.

Trying again, I forced my eyes to open. I groaned at the blinding light that assaulted my senses. It made everything blurry, but after a few blinks, I noticed a figure next to me become clear, causing another groan to escape.

“You're not who I want,” I mumbled, trying to move my head to get a better look at my surroundings. My neck hurt. Hell, everything did. The more alert I was getting, the more pain I felt.

*Shit.*

“I would hope not. Otherwise, I would believe you were at death's door again.” Tobias muttered, sitting down on a chair next to me. His voice was gruff, but there was a note of concern that I couldn't ignore.

*Where the fuck was I?*

Squinting around, the sterile room seemed to close in on me, suffocating me with its oppressive silence. The beeping of

machines and the overpowering scent of antiseptic made it clear that I was in a hospital.

“Well, fuck,” I groaned, feeling the weight of despair settle on me. The hospital was the last place I wanted to be, but it seemed I couldn’t stay away. The memories of the last time I was here, my burnt skin seared into my mind, made me want to curl up and disappear.

*Wait...*

“What did you say?” I managed to rasp out. My throat was raw and sore. The cold glass of water he handed me was like a lifeline, and I drank it down greedily.

“You overdosed,” he said, his voice laced with frustration. My heart raced as his words sunk in. “Your body went into severe overdrive, and you were so close to a heart attack. The doctors believe you had a seizure, but it was actually you choking on your own vomit that nearly took your life, Lucas.”

The beeping machines in the room grew louder, reminding me of where I was.

“No,” I whispered, shaking my head in disbelief. My mind raced, trying to piece together the lost memories, but all I felt was a numbing emptiness.

A cold chill ran down my spine. No, they must have been mistaken.

Everything was fine. I was fine!

I tried remembering the last thing I did before ending up here, but my mind was blank. We were at my house, waiting

for Vincent, but then what?

*Grace! Vincent!*

“If it wasn’t for your friend who did CPR on you, you wouldn’t be here,” Tobias’s voice brought me back to the present.”

“Where is Grace?” I asked. She wasn’t here. No one was apart from Tobias.

My mind was clouded with worry for Grace, for Vincent, for my circle. The room’s silence felt suffocating, and I longed for the comfort of their presence. But they weren’t here.

*No one was here!*

My chest and every other part of my body ached as I felt the chaos within me. My circle felt limp and defeated inside me, the complete opposite to the hope and excitement I had felt just moments ago. It felt like our goal was slipping further and further away from us.

*What did I do?*

A surge of panic rose within me, making my dry throat even tighter. I desperately needed to see Grace, to know she was okay. The wires and machines I was hooked up to felt like chains, trapping me to this god-awful lifeless bed.

“I need to see her.” I pleaded, my fingers grasping at the rough bed sheets, trying to tear myself free. I needed my circle members now more than ever.

“You are not seeing her right now.” Tobias’s voice was stern, his grip firm as he held my hand to prevent me from removing the IV from my arm. My body was racked with pain, and I could feel my muscles trembling. It felt like I was on the verge of breaking down, but I refused to give in to the weakness that threatened to overtake me.

“If you do not calm down, I will get a nurse to put you back under!” He hissed, leaning into me to show he wasn’t bullshitting in his threat.

I stopped, swallowing felt like drinking sand as I tried to find ways to get him to call Grace here.

“Let me see her,” I begged, my voice hoarse as a new sting developed on my lips from the cracks. I tasted the metallic tang of blood on my tongue.

“You’ll see her after we talk,” Tobias said, his voice softening as he placed a hand on my shoulder. The concern on his face only made me feel more anxious, a sense of dread weighing me down.

“There is nothing to talk about,” I growled, trying to brush his hand off me.

“Lucas,” Tobias sighed out my name, and I saw the worry etched on his face. He rubbed his eyes tiredly, and I could tell he was just as exhausted as I was. But his expression only served to make me feel more anxious. A sense of dread hung heavy around us, suffocating me.

“Do you remember what happened?” he asked gently, but his words felt like a cold shower to my already aching body. Memories flooded my mind, memories of pain, fear, and abandonment.

No one came when I called for help, just like now. The memory left me feeling hopeless and alone, and I shook my head, unable to look him in the eye.

“You have been asleep for a few days now.” He explained like it was something I should know, “This isn’t the first time you have woken up.”

“I want to see, Grace,” I demanded, my voice quivering with emotion. I didn’t want to talk about what happened, how I got here, or what the hell I was thinking. I didn’t want anything he was offering. All I wanted was to feel the warmth of my circle members, to know that I wasn’t alone in this nightmare.

“You died, Lucas.” Tobias’s words hit me.

But I shook my head, forcing a laugh out that became a painful cough. My stomach felt like it was full of glass shards, each movement sending sharp stabs of pain throughout my body.

Tobias repeated himself, his voice laced with anger and frustration. He wanted me to understand the severity of the situation, but all I could think was that this couldn’t be happening to me. Memories were flickering, but it was all just a giant patch of hopeless of darkness.

Tobias sighed as I continued to shake my head. “I’ve been looking at rehabs.” He said softly, but the ringing waves hit me with force.

“No.” My voice came out like a croak, but my mind was on other matters, like getting out of this fucking hospital bed. Wires be damned!

“You have a problem you need to acknowledge, Lucas.” Tobias insisted his voice firm as he stood up again. He was going to hold me down if he needed to.

“I don’t have a fucking problem!” I spat out, trying to yank the sticky wires off my chest. My heart raced with panic and anger. “I’m not going anywhere. You can’t make me!”

“I will,” Tobias said, his tone growing harsher. He easily held onto me, stopping me from my escape. “Even if I have to get your dads to sign over your guardianship.”

“Fuck you! You can’t take me away from them!” I shouted. I refused to let that happen. No one was going to separate me from my circle.

“Lucas! I will call a nurse to sedate you if you don’t calm down.”

Calm down? How could I when he threatened to take away the very thing I needed!

“Easy!” He growled in warning, the sound reverberating through the small hospital room. I struggled against his weight, feeling trapped and helpless. I just wished I had the strength to punch him and make him let me go.

“You can’t do this!” I shouted, my throat raw and my body wracked with pain as I tried to sit up. But I was weak, and the effort left me gasping for breath.

“It’s for the best. You need help, Lucas! This would be for the best, for you and for Grace.” Tobias’s voice was firm, his black eyes burning into mine. “Do you really want to expose Grace to this?”

“Fuck you!” I shook my head, my grip on the bed sheets tight. I couldn’t meet his gaze, knowing that disappointment would be written all over his face.

“She has already seen you dead. What else would you have her witness?” Tobias’s words hit me like a slap to the face, and I felt tears stinging in the corners of my eyes.

“No.” I shook my head, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Yes.” He hissed back, his anger palpable. “My little girl had to experience the worst thing imaginable in this world. Feeling a part of her soul dying. All because of you. So, tell me the truth, Lucas. Are you *really* okay?”

“Yes. I’m fine.” I lied, my words sounding hollow even to my own ears.

Tobias shook his head in disappointment, towering over me. “Not good enough.”

“Please,” I cried as my body slumped back against the pillows, my energy completely drained. Every breath was agony, and I knew I was paying the price for my actions.



“Why can’t you leave me to deal with it?” I asked, my voice shaking with frustration and fear. My head was slick with sweat, and Tobias quickly wiped my brow with a cool cloth. “I will get better, I swear.”

“Because I care.” He said simply, his voice softening.

“Funny way of showing it. You’ve been trying to drive me away since you found out I was in your daughter’s circle. You hate me.” I sounded calm on the surface, but inside I was raging with anger and hurt.

Tobias scoffed as he gently folded the cloth and placed it on my head, “I don’t hate you, Lucas. How could I hate someone who holds my little girl’s soul?”

“So, it’s out of duty.” I spat with a wave of bitterness. I wasn’t surprised by his concern. Anyone else in town would also fear their child being tainted by me.

Tobias shook his head, “No, Lucas. You need to understand that people here want to help you. Not everyone sees you the way you see yourself. And I can see that you’re a young man crying for help. And I am not blind nor deaf. I won’t just stand around and do nothing.”

“But you’re trying to take them away from me,” I protested weakly, feeling helpless and alone.

“I’m not taking anyone away from you. But sometimes in life, you need to take a step back to heal before moving forward,” he said firmly.

“Don’t compare us to your circle,” I snapped, my anger rising again.

I knew enough of his circle’s history to see where he was going with this. Grace told me the story of their circle, and what other reason would he have to help me if not for seeing history repeat itself?

“How could I not? Graham was a lot like you when he was your age. He threw temper tantrums too. I’m glad he grew out of that phase.” He muttered.

“You’re seriously joking right now?” I asked, shaking my head in disbelief. “I think anyone would go insane with you always... *there*,” I said, my frustration boiling.

“You see me as in the way? Good. Because from this moment forward, I will be standing in your path, and I won’t let you take another step. If somehow you try to get past me, I will drag you back here, again and again, until you accept that you need help.” Tobias replied sternly, his eyes locking onto mine.

He wasn’t messing around here. He was very serious, and I doubted he cared about what me or Grace wanted. My head pounded, and my heart raced as I struggled to find the words to express my pain.

“Tell me, Lucas. Are you seriously okay?” He asked again, his voice cutting through the silence of the hospital room. “Think about it while you lay in the hospital bed you’ve been in for the last few days.”

I opened my mouth, but he cut me off before I could speak.

“Before you answer. Let me tell you this. If you lie, I will make damn sure you won’t come anywhere near Grace again until you’re better.” His voice was harsh, and his tone was unwavering.

The weight of his words settled heavily on my chest, and I couldn’t help but feel like I was drowning in a sea of guilt and shame. For years, I had bottled up my pain, pretending to be okay to everyone around me. I was invisible, basically unnoticeable if it wasn’t for my temper.

I was used to pretending I was okay because nobody cared to know the truth. My family was the broken one in town, and everyone feared they’d end up like us. It was better for people to ignore us than to witness what they could become if they lost their circle.

But now, I was forced to confront the truth, and it was smothering.

I wasn’t okay. I hadn’t been for a long time. Finding my circle was meant to make me better, but here I am in a hospital bed. I never wanted Vincent or Grace to feel disappointed that they couldn’t fix me. But I’ve seriously messed up, and with how they felt inside me, I had ruined everything again.

“I’m not....” My voice cracked, and I could feel the burning in my throat as I fought back the tears. My entire body trembled with the effort of trying to keep everything inside. Taking a deep breath, I tried again. “I’m not okay.”

Tobias nodded curtly. “Good. Say it again.”

“I already said it.” I gritted out as frustration burned inside me.

“Say. It. Again.” He ordered, his voice firm but not unkind.

I sighed long before muttering, “I’m not okay.” My throat felt tight as if it were being squeezed by an invisible hand.

“Again.”

“I’m not okay.” This time, my voice was stronger and more resolute. My heart was racing, and my palms were slick with sweat. I refused to cry out or plead for help. For comfort... for love.

Tobias’s rough hand gently cupped the side of my face, “Look at me, son.” He pushed my head up to meet his eyes. “I’m proud of you for admitting it. It’s not easy.”

A ragged exhale came out of me while my eyes automatically looked away. I swallowed hard, holding back tears as I met his gaze. The weight of everything felt overwhelming, like an unbearable burden crushing my chest.

“I never wanted this,” I openly admitted, my voice barely above a whisper.

“You might never have wanted this, but this is the reality. You have to face it, even if you don’t like what you see.”

*I already don’t.*

“Tell me what you took.”

“Coke,” I whispered, feeling the pull of my addiction tearing me apart. It didn’t care that I was in the hospital or in pain. It just needed the white powder.

*No, I don’t need it!* I forced myself to think.

***It would keep the pain away.***

I grimaced, hating myself further.

“It wasn’t your first time,” Tobias stated.

I didn’t need to confirm. We both knew it wasn’t. A feeling of shame and regret washed over me as I realized how deep I was in it. I never wanted it to go this far. I just wanted to be better than who I was.

A feeling brushed inside me, a flicker of determination. I felt it solidifying while my shoulders eased with acceptance.

“I need help.” My voice came out as a desperate plea, barely audible above the sound of my racing heart. I couldn’t believe I had let myself spiral so far down, but the reality was staring me in the face, and I couldn’t deny it anymore.

“Yes, you do.” Tobias’s grip on my shoulder tightened, offering a small measure of comfort. “You’re moving in with us.”

“What?” I croaked out, my throat dry with fear.

“Perhaps they need to check on your hearing when they come to look at your vitals.” Tobias’s sarcasm was like a slap in the face. Whoever believed this man was a stoic asshole

was wrong. The man was one sassy asshole, and I couldn't help the small smile that tugged at my lips.

"I said you are moving in with us."

"You can't just demand that," I protested weakly, already starting to sweat at the thought of being around Grace's family.

My mind whirled with possibilities, imagining what it would be like to live with them. Would they judge me? Would they pity me? Or worse, would they ignore me? I couldn't bear the thought of being a burden to anyone.

"It's either that or a rehab center." Tobias's voice was matter-of-fact, and I knew he wasn't bluffing. "Either way, you will be monitored for the next year or so. Maybe longer, depending on how you do. So, pick one, Lucas."

I closed my eyes, trying to block out the world around me. Living with the Millington's would be a challenge. It was already hard seeing them as one big happy family. I hated watching it from the outside. But I was a selfish bastard at heart and maybe a glutton for punishment. I knew there wasn't a choice for me. I couldn't just leave my circle.

"I will move in with you." My voice sounded foreign to my own ears, raspy and unsteady. My stomach churned with nervousness, and my palms were slick with sweat. Moving in with them was a big step, and I wasn't sure if I was ready.

Tobias nodded, his face a mask of understanding, but I could sense the concern in his eyes. "Okay. But I hope you know that just because it's not a rehab center doesn't mean it

will be a walk in the park. You will be having therapy with one of Brenda's friends, who was nice enough to offer her services."

I scowled at the thought of therapy. It made my skin crawl. I didn't like it because it was basically paying someone to listen to you and tell you what was wrong with you. I didn't want anyone to tell me that I was messed up. I already knew that.

"Don't give me that look. If you want to live with us, you will have these sessions," Tobias said firmly, and I knew there was no arguing with him.

"I could just go back to my dad's, you know," I said stubbornly, grasping at any alternative to avoid facing my problems.

"I think we both know that you don't want that," Tobias countered, brushing his hands down his dark gray dress pants. I couldn't help but wonder who the hell dressed like they were about to go into a meeting for a hospital visit.

I shifted uncomfortably, feeling exposed under Tobias's piercing gaze. I knew Tobias was right. I couldn't go back to my dad's place, not after everything that had happened.

Tobias's voice brought me back to the present. "Lucas, I know this isn't easy. But it's necessary. You can't keep running from your problems. You need to face them head-on if you want to get better."

I hung my head, feeling a mix of shame and desperation. I wanted to be better.

“Fine.” My voice was barely above a whisper. “But I want to see Grace and for you to never threaten to separate us again.”

Tobias let out a long sigh as he settled deeper into his seat. “I never would have separated you from her. It would only be your doing if that were to happen.”

I looked away, feeling a knot form in my stomach. I knew he was right.

“There will be rules if you live with us. I understand it will be an adjustment period for you, but if you ever use again, Lucas, I will find out, and you will go to rehab. Understand?”

I nodded, knowing that this was my last chance. I had to make it work, for Grace, for Vincent, and, I guess, for myself.

“Good,” Tobias said curtly before leaning over to press a button on the wall.

As the adrenaline from the chaos began to disappear, a tidal wave of agony crashed over me, and I realized how much excruciating pain I was in. It felt like a thousand knives stabbing me in the stomach, causing me to groan and clutch at my belly while squeezing my eyes shut to fight the agony.

“Fuuuck!” I groaned, the sound escaping my lips before I could stop it. I gasped for breath, feeling like I was suffocating under the weight of the pain.

Even my damaged leg was acting up, probably from remembering all the pain I felt when I was here last time.



Just as I was about to cry out, a nurse rushed in, and I breathed a deep sigh of relief. The sight of her was like a lifeline in a sea of pain. She gave me a comforting smile, but her voice sounded distant and muffled, as if she was speaking through a tunnel. I could only focus on the sharp, throbbing ache that emitted through my entire body.

The nurse sent me another sympathetic smile as she administered medication. “This should stabilize you. It will make you drowsy, but you won’t feel any more pain for a few hours.”

Relief washed over me like a cool breeze on a scorching day, soothing the ache in my body and lulling me into a state of peace. The sensation was pure bliss as if all the tension building up in me for the last few days was melting away. My body felt light and weightless as if I was floating on a cloud.

Fuck, that felt nice.

“Can you get Grace?” My voice was slurred as I turned to Tobias.

“Sleep, Lucas.” He ordered me firmly.

Even in my haze, my mind couldn’t escape the weight of guilt crushing me. I needed to apologize to Grace and Vincent. I knew I couldn’t sleep, not until I apologized to them.

They had to know how sorry I was.

“Tell Grace I’m sorry.” I pleaded, my voice shaking. “Please, just tell her....” I trailed off, my words slurring together as exhaustion overtook me.

“You will tell her yourself when you wake up.”

“Fuck you...” I muttered, frustrated that I couldn’t make things right.

“Sleep. You are going to have a rough journey ahead.”

I didn’t want to go back to the darkness. I didn’t want to be alone with my thoughts and regrets.

“I’m here, son. I will watch over you,” Tobias’s voice came next to me, bringing a sense of warmth and safety that I desperately needed to the dark void.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### GRACE

Lucas was now awake, though he wasn't ready to get up and walk around just yet. He had fully woken up once, but I was not there when it happened. He was up this morning, but the doctor came in to do more tests before I could speak to him.

Father and I were cast out into the waiting room while Lucas's room was off-limits as the nurses removed his wires and assisted him with an overdue shower. It was quiet except for the sound of the TV, but the tension in the air was stifling.

"I don't know what to say to him," I whispered, my voice barely above a breath. My heart was racing, and my palms were slick with sweat. I felt like a newborn fawn stumbling through life, unsure of my footing and vulnerable to any predator that might come my way. I didn't know the right words to say or actions to take.

My father's hand found its way to my shoulder, and I looked up to see the empathy in his eyes. His grip was reassuring.

“I never knew what to say either,” he murmured. “I always managed to say the wrong thing to Graham. No matter what I said, it only made things worse.”

Father and Da had always had an explosive partnership. Out of everyone in my parents’ circle, they argued the most, but I always felt like they were also the closest. I knew they held a deep respect for each other.

Father carried on, “But it was then I realized something. I was saying the right thing because it was what I felt. If that upsets anyone, that is on them to deal with, not me.”

Watching Father, I could see the pain in his eyes as he spoke, but his words brought a sense of clarity. It may be time to stop worrying about saying the ‘right’ thing and start speaking from the heart.

“I just don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“What more pain could you inflict, Grace? Lucas died.” My father’s words were sharp, but I knew they came from a place of love and concern, but that still didn’t stop me from lashing back.

“I know.” I snapped back, unable to control my body from shaking at the memory. I wanted to run and hide from the world. I wanted the possibility to deny that he did die, but I never could. It was right there, front and center, haunting me with its cold, unyielding presence.

I could still see his lifeless blues staring blankly at the ceiling, and my heart ached with a pain that never seemed to

go away.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you further,” Father said tenderly and apologetically. “What you went through-”

“Please, don’t,” I begged, cutting him off before he could finish his sentence. “It’s still too....” The words caught in my throat, and I couldn’t bring myself to say them out loud.

The snake of the bond coiled around my neck, tightening in a warning. It just felt like the wrong thing to talk about, like opening a wound that had never fully healed.

“Say whatever you need to say, Grace. You could talk till you’re blue in the face, but no words can truly fix this.” Father spoke softly, his dark eyes looking at me with pity. My heart ached with a sense of hopelessness, and I could feel tears in my eyes. “It is up to Lucas to change, not you.”

“But are circles not meant to make everything better?” My voice quivered with a sense of naive optimism, desperately clinging to any shred of hope.

Father gave a rare low chuckle, but it was tinged with sadness. His expression seemed to say it all, and the weight of his words hit me like a ton of bricks. “If that was the case, then there wouldn’t be any problems in the world.”

“I just really want to help.”

“Of course you do. I do as well, but enabling him won’t help him in the long run.”

“Then what do I do?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. I felt so helpless, so lost. I wanted everything to have

been a nightmare. I wanted to wake up and start again.

Father's voice was soft and heavy with the weight of experience as he replied, "There is nothing you can do, Grace. People like Lucas would say practically anything to help people around them feel better. They know the right words to say." Father's words were heavy with the weight of truth. "When you speak to him, he will most likely say what you want to hear. But nothing will get better if you believe him."

"You think he will lie?" I asked, feeling a sense of betrayal creeping into my heart.

"Hasn't he already?" Father's words cut like a knife. "Lucas's addiction has caused him to lie not only to you but to himself as well. In my own opinion, actions are far louder than words. It is the only truth you can actually see. Words mean nothing as people offer them too freely."

"I will be setting some ground rules for him while he's living with us, and I suggest you do the same for him," Father said sternly.

"Rules." I nodded in agreement as a fierce determination ran through me.

I could think of a lot of rules that I wanted to establish. Anything so this would never happen again because what happened that night would forever haunt me.

"If he uses anything, Grace, he's out. No second chances." Father's words were heavy, but I knew he meant them.

My heart ached at the thought, but I pushed forward, nodding.

“Promise me, Grace. He will be sent to rehab if you find out or feel that he has used anything through your connection.” The weight of Father’s words hung heavy in the air. I took a deep breath and nodded, determined to keep my promise.

“Good,” Father whispered, patting my knee before straightening his back.

“Thank you for letting him stay with us.” Tears welled in my eyes as I whispered my gratitude and wiped them away.

“It won’t be easy. When Lucas’s withdrawals kick in, he won’t be himself for the next few weeks. I don’t want you to witness that,” Father said gently.

“But-”

“No, Grace. Let me deal with him during that time,” Father interrupted firmly.

I hesitantly nodded, feeling the weight of my responsibility on my shoulders. I knew this would be a difficult journey, but I was determined to be there whenever I could.

“Just be patient,” Father said, sending me a side-eye. “Like I have been, waiting for you to realize.”

“Realize what?” I asked, curious.

“That I wasn’t born yesterday. Did you really think you could hide that you found another circle member?” He raised an eyebrow at me.

I froze, my heart beating so fast I could feel it in my throat. I swallowed, trying to find my words, but nothing came as we stared at each other. The last thing I needed was to disappoint Father, especially after all he had done.

“At first, I thought maybe it could be your friend, Julia,” Father spoke, seemingly pleased with himself, giving me his private, rare smile. “But then it wasn’t hard to figure out who it actually was when he was lingering around the hospital. The only other person to visit Lucas.”

My cheeks flushed, and I felt a surge of guilt. I hadn’t wanted to keep my circle a secret from them, and I couldn’t lie. Relief washed over me as the lie was exposed...

“I’ve been trying to get a chance to talk to him, but he is quite a slippery young man. I’m not sure if I approve.” Father grumbled, crossing his arms over his chest.

I could sense the frustration in his voice, and the tension in the room grew thicker. “I bet you found that annoying,” I uttered quietly, biting my lip with worry.

“Oh, it frustrated me immensely.” He said sternly, making us go into a thick silence. I could feel the weight of his disappointment heavy on my shoulders.

Father sighed, saying under his breath, “But then I came to the conclusion that you all must have had a reason not to tell us.”

“Have you told the others?”



“No. I’m sure your mother knows, though she hasn’t spoken to me about it.

“Thank you.” I breathed out a sigh of relief. I didn’t want the others to find out like this. I wanted a chance to tell them myself.

“I hope you know I’m not angry,” Father said after a few moments, his voice softening. “I might not understand why you kept it hidden, but we are here for you, Grace. For all of your circle.”

“I know,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Tell this other guy to meet us whenever he is ready.”

*If only he knew.*



I had been waiting anxiously outside Lucas’s hospital room for what felt like hours. Then, finally, the door opened, and a nurse walked out, smiling at me.

“He’s awake now,” he said kindly. “You can go see him.”

I took a deep breath and walked into the room, my heart pounding in my chest. There he was, propped up on pillows and looking pale but alert. His head came up from whatever he was looking at on his lap as he turned his head towards me, our eyes meeting.

We both froze there, staring at each other. It was odd to see him without piercings on his face. His face looked naked and

exposed, along with his usually messy hair, which was now combed back out of his eyes.

“Hey,” he said, breaking the silence as he gave me a weak smile while I felt his soul treading carefully closer to me. It felt like a dog with its tail between its legs.

All the emotions I had felt up to this point came crashing back, sadness, grief, and anger. All of it came tumbling into me as I stood there, feeling the world around me shift.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I gritted out through the burning chaos inside me, my voice shaking with anger. I tried to close my eyes, but all I could see were those lifeless, dead eyes staring back at me, haunting me.

Opening them, I connected to Lucas’s living ones. Relief flooded through me as I watched him breathe, and I reminded myself that he was alive. But the emotions I had suppressed for the past few days came flooding back, threatening to overwhelm me.

“I...” He rubbed his face, his voice barely above a whisper, “I was scared. I thought if you knew, you would leave me.”

My heart broke at his words, and I shook my head in disbelief. “Lucas, you should know that I wouldn’t. I would have helped you.”

“You had a lot going on. I didn’t want to add to that,” he said, his voice still low and filled with guilt.

Tears stung my eyes, and I struggled to keep my composure. “Do you really think I would-“I stopped, forcing myself to

take a shuddering breath and ignore my angry pulse. “Do you think I would want you to keep something like this from me? To suffer in silence?”

“I didn’t want you to worry,” he said, his eyes downcast.

I waved my hand around his hospital room, feeling anger boiling within me. Lucas had the audacity to look down in shame, and I could feel my blood pressure rising with each passing moment. “I’ve never been more worried in my life than I have been this past week,” I spat out, my voice shaking with emotion as I tried to control my anger.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Don’t.” I fumed, holding my hand up to stop his words. I didn’t want to hear it. I could feel tears pricking at the corners of my eyes, but I refused to let them fall.

A sad laugh escaped me, “You always know the right words to say, Lucas.” I said sincerely as I thought back to what Father had said. He was right, and I was ashamed I didn’t see how Lucas was. “You know the right words to hurt me and the right words to ease me. But that’s all they are, words.”

“Grace,” Lucas said, desperation creeping into his voice.

“I’m done.” I finally said what I came here to say, feeling the weight of the decision heavy on my chest.

“Grace, please listen.”

“No, Lucas.” I wiped my eyes, hating how fragile I felt on the inside. “I’m done with your words and Vincent’s as well.” My voice rose with each word as I let my anger consume me.

“From these past few days, I’ve been in my head wanting us to be better. I didn’t want us to end up like those horror stories of other circles. I’ve been so anxious over something I should have realized I couldn’t control.”

“Grace-”

“Shut up!” I screamed, my throat raw with pent-up emotion. Lucas flinched, his eyes widening in surprise. “All this time, I thought I was doing good by going along with you guys. I’ve been accepting and trying to push us all in a direction for us to be a healthy circle. But we are not a circle.”

All this time, I had been trying to keep the peace, to make things work between us. But the truth was, we were never truly a circle.

We are a group that had no trust in each other. Just strangers pulled together by fate, and we are all expected to fit together, regardless of where or who we are in life. It’s what my parents have been trying to teach me, what they warned me about, and I was stupid and naive to think I might have been an exception.

I was scared to find my circle for this very reason, but now, after everything, I wasn’t scared of my circle anymore.

“We’re not working together. We’re each pulling in different directions, and it’s tearing us apart,” I continued, my voice trembling with raw emotion. “I can’t keep pretending that everything is okay, that we’re a functioning circle. We’re not. And until we can learn to trust each other and work together, I’m done.”

It felt like a weight had been lifted off my chest, a burden I had carried for far too long. For once, I was putting myself first, and it felt fucking liberating. I knew that in order to be a strong circle, we all needed to sort out our own issues first. But for now, I was focusing on myself.

I felt unstoppable, free.

I couldn't stop the trembles of adrenaline pulsing through me.

I saw the hurt in Lucas's eyes, and a pang of guilt twisted in my chest. But I knew I had to be firm. We couldn't keep going in circles like this. We needed to face our problems head-on, or we'd never be able to move forward.

"Until we can work together as a real circle, I need to focus on myself," I said, my tone softer now. "I'm sorry, but that's my only way forward."

Lucas's eyes brimmed with unshed tears, and I could feel his pain. I hated to see him like this, so vulnerable and lost. But I knew that my decision was the right one. We couldn't continue like this, pretending that everything was okay when it clearly wasn't.

"I'm sorry," Lucas whispered, his voice breaking.

"Enough with the sorry," I snapped, frustration bubbling back up inside me. "We need to stop apologizing and start taking action."

"Please, don't leave me," he pleaded, his voice small and desperate.

I glared at him, ignoring the guilt that was swimming around me. I hated being angry while he was vulnerable. But I knew deep in my heart I needed to take a stand against him and against Vincent.

“Let’s get one thing straight. I am not leaving you,” I snapped out, disliking the flinch Lucas gave me. “But I will, Lucas. If you take anything again, I will.”

The memory of finding Lucas unconscious, lying in a pool of his own vomit, still haunted me. I couldn’t bear the thought of going through that again.

“It won’t happen again,” Lucas promised, his eyes pleading with me to believe him.

I knew he meant it, but I couldn’t help but feel a twinge of doubt. The warning of Father’s was still ringing in my ears. Words were easy, but actions were harder.

“Words mean nothing at this moment,” I said, my voice low and firm. “I need you to show me, not just tell me.”

“I promise I won’t,” Lucas said, the panic evident in his voice as he struggled to sit up from his bed. “You will see, Grace. I will show you.”

I really wanted to believe him. I really did. But the doubts lingered in the back of my mind. We had a long road ahead of us, and I wasn’t sure if we would ever be able to truly trust each other again.

I could only give him a short nod. There was nothing else to say at this moment. It was now up to Lucas to mend himself. I

would support him, of course, but I couldn't hold his hand every step of the way.

Lucas's hand shook as he reached out for me. I stiffened my body as I held in the urge to run and hold him like I wanted to. The need to cry in his arms and be comforted by him sounded so desirable, but I couldn't rely on him like that, not while I was still making my stand.

"Please, Grace," Lucas asked softly. His pale face and weak appearance pulled on my heartstrings, and I couldn't blame it on his manipulation skills. Because the truth was that Lucas nearly died, no, he did die. I had lost him, and for that brief moment, I had thought I would never hear his voice or feel his warmth again.

"I'm here," Lucas croaked, tears running down his face, his hand still reaching for me. Even his soul strained, calling me to go to him.

I blinked back the threatening tears that were brimming as I walked into his embrace. The moment my arms wrapped around him, I felt his fragility. He was a shell of the strong and vibrant man I fell in love with. My heart clenched in my chest, and I held him tighter as if I could protect him from the world and its cruelties.

He didn't smell like my Lucas. There was no sunscreen or lemon on his skin. Instead, he smelled of soap and the lingering scent of disinfectant that was around the hospital. The realization hit me again - how close I came to losing him.

“I hate you,” I whispered into his chest. My voice shook with emotion, and I could feel my hands balling into fists. The anger was bubbling inside me, threatening to explode.

“I love you,” Lucas whispered back, his nose sniffling as I felt warm tears roll down my cheek and neck.

“Words!” I shouted in a sob, my voice raw with pain. My hands ached at how hard I gripped him, but I didn’t care. I needed to hold him, feel his warmth, and hear his heartbeat.

“I will keep saying them to you until you believe my words again,” Lucas spoke, rubbing his cheek on mine. “But until then, feel me. Feel my love.”

I did. I felt him inside me. The warm embrace growing stronger by the day since it went out was a reminder that Lucas was still here. I still had him.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” Lucas murmured into my hair before inhaling as his hands gripped me tighter. I could feel his chest heaving with deep sobs as he held me, as if afraid to let go.

“I lost you!” I cried out, grabbing at his gown as I struggled to resolve my emotional breakdown.

“I know, and I’m so sorry.” He whispered. His hand gently brushed my back, comforting me even though he was the one who died. I felt his warmth envelop me as he pulled me closer, his embrace strong and secure.

His hand palmed my cheek, gently rubbing away the tear stains on my cheeks as he forced me to look into his ocean



blues.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” Lucas murmured, his voice heavy with shame. “I’ve always felt like I didn’t belong like I was missing something everyone else had. I read stories about circle members coming to whisk you away and fix everything, and I wanted that so badly. I wanted to be loved despite my flaws, but I didn’t want to burden you with my problems.”

“You are not a burden,” I said firmly, my heart aching for him. “You are the one person who makes everything better for me. Can’t you see how much I need you?”

Lucas’s cheeks flushed with emotion as he looked away. “I like being someone you can rely on, but I worried that you wouldn’t want me anymore if you knew how messed up my head was. You’d want someone who wasn’t broken.”

“You are not broken!” I hissed. I wanted to tear up Lucas’s self-hate. Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes as I reached out to take his hand. “I’m here, Lucas,” I said, my voice soft and gentle. “Relationships work both ways. Trust is something we all need.”

“I do trust you,” Lucas replied, his voice still heavy with emotion.

“No, you don’t,” I said firmly, my frustration mounting. “You think I’m going to run away at the first sign of anything difficult. Ever since we found each other, you’ve been acting differently. You don’t trust me to love who you truly are. I don’t want you to be someone you’re not, Lucas.”

Lucas looked down at his lap and began fidgeting with a long string of fabric. As I glanced down, I noticed knitting gear on the bed around him and tangled knots of wool.

“It’s-er, just a hobby I’m thinking of trying out,” he spoke quickly, seeming a little sheepish as he hurriedly pushed yarn balls into a bag and dropped it on his bedside table.

“You don’t have to hide, Lucas. You don’t have to hide what you like or who you are. Trust me,” I said, hoping to reassure him.

Lucas gave a tight swallow as he nodded. Through our bond, I could feel a warm, full feeling rising in my chest as his emotions overwhelmed him, making him unable to speak.

Without thinking, I grabbed the back of his head and pulled him into my chest, enveloping him both physically and emotionally, giving him a moment of comfort in my arms.

“I’m sorry for not seeing it,” I said honestly.

I’d been so focused on Vincent and our bond that I’d brushed Lucas aside, not truly seeing how he had been struggling. My throat tightened with a lump of regret.

“We are a messed-up circle,” I could hear the smile in his tone, and it made me feel a bit better to hear him trying to find humor in our situation.

“A little bit,” I agreed, trying to match his tone, “but I think we can improve. We just need to work on our communication.” My voice faltered as I spoke, and I took a deep breath to steady myself.

“I’m sorry.” He said again, and I could hear the sincerity in his voice.

“I am, too,” I said, brushing my wet cheek with the back of my hand. “But I can’t stop the anger I feel. My head is a mess, I’m incredibly happy that you’re alive, yet I’m so furious with you both at the same time. Especially Vincent.” My voice trembled with emotion as I spoke, and I could feel my conflicting feelings pressing down on me.

“Be angry at me however you need to be, but don’t blame Vincent,” Lucas said firmly, and I could sense his discomfort with the situation.

“He deserves it!” I hissed, my voice rising with the intensity of my anger. I wanted to tell him of Vincent’s refusal to be by his side. “He burnt you!”

Lucas’s eyes widened before they softened immensely, and I felt the warmth of his empathy radiating toward me. “I don’t blame him, Grace.”

“But he hurt you. How can you stand knowing he has scarred you forever?”

“Because I knew what I was doing,” Lucas replied, his voice quiet but steady. “Besides, it’s not his fault. I told you at the lake I was playing with fire.”

I scowled, causing Lucas to sigh aloud, “We both should have told you how we met right away.”

“I was in a dark place at the time,” he continued, his tone growing more distant as he spoke. “I’ve always loved a good

party, and back then, I was into them even more than I am now. I drank, hooked up with people, got into fights, and... drugs. At the start, I only did weed and shrooms. Nothing like now.” The shame and regret in his voice, as if he was reliving the worst moments of his life.

“I’d known Vincent for a little bit. We had nothing to do with each other back then. We weren’t in the same social group, but I always saw him at parties. He was there every single time, and it didn’t make sense. I thought he was an awkward nerd wanting to get laid. But, man, was I wrong.” He gave a forced laugh, but it was hollow, lacking real joy.

“I witnessed him dealing one night. I saw this little bag full of white power that he handed over to this guy like it was nothing. I knew what it was, and, at that moment, I wanted to try it. So, I went up to him, and we both instantly hated each other. Vincent is an asshole. He is unlikeable and arrogant. It was so easy to get him to react, and I just wanted to make him snap from that point on.

“Of course, he refused to sell it to me. My likable charms would make any miserable, grumpy bastard more stubborn. But his refusal, it only made me want it more. So, I watched him for days, watching his movement, trying to find his stash, and when I did, I stole it.”

*‘He stole something from me.’* Vincent had told me that on our date.

“I stole it all. I had a little power trip and thought it would be a good idea to sell some and make some quick cash. So I

snorted some, sold some of the rest for dirt cheap, and partied all through the night. Word gets around very fast in a small town. It was only a matter of time before Vincent showed his face. He caught me, literally with my trousers down and high as a fucking kite on his stash.”

Lucas wasn't looking at me at this moment. I felt rising anxiety as I watched Lucas struggle with his words. I knew what had happened next. Vincent punched him, but surely Lucas wouldn't have gotten his scars the day they found each other, right?

“He wasn't the only one there. A few other older guys came with him. I knew then that this was something much bigger than I had first thought, and well... They roughed me up a bit. That's how I found out Vincent was part of our circle. He punched me right in the face and broke my nose. What a way, huh?” He gave another fake laugh. “We were both in shock, but the other guys didn't notice. I don't know how. He stood there frozen on the spot. I remember how wide his eyes were and how much I could feel him, the shock before the dread and fear came. His terror made me realize something more was going to happen to me than just a beating.

“They took me, put me in the trunk of the car, and drove. We drove, and all the while, I could feel Vincent's panic. I was fucking drunk, high, and in a state I'd never experienced before. I had just found my circle member and was trying to work out the bond. I was scared, confused, and in a fucked-up sense, so happy I found him- even if he is a dick.”

I could feel my heart racing as Lucas recounted the harrowing details of his nightmarish experience. His voice trembled with raw emotion as he described the fear and confusion he felt when he realized the gravity of the situation he had stumbled into. It was as if I was reliving the horrors of that night alongside him.

“I was taken to a warehouse just outside of town,” he said, his voice trembling with emotion. “I was slung up on a meat hook, ready to atone for my sins.” The pain and fear on his face made it clear that the memory of that night still haunted him.

“Samson,” I said, realization dawning on me.

Lucas nodded wearily. “Samson. I didn’t believe the rumors about the underground crime ring in town, but they were true.”

Lucas looked out of the window for a moment, watching the wind blowing on the trees. I knew he was reliving it all by the way his body trembled.

“I met the real Samson that night,” Lucas continued. “He said if I wanted his stash that badly, then I could have the whole lot. So they injected me, again and again.” Lucas rubbed his inner arms, a distant look in his eyes. I could almost feel the prickling of the needles on my own skin.

“They planned to kill me with an overdose, a perfect cover, and a message to anyone thinking of stealing and selling on their turf.” The words were bitter and heavy as they rolled over Lucas’s tongue. I could sense the anger and frustration in his voice, the injustice of it all.

“I mean, it was a perfect cover-up for someone like me.” He gave another forced laugh, but it was hollow and devoid of humor. The fear clinging to his soul was palpable, like the acrid smell of smoke that lingered long after the fire had gone out.

I clasped my hand over my mouth in horror, unable to imagine the terror Lucas must have felt.

Lucas grimaced before he placed his head in his hands and said how he truly felt. “I was so stupid. So incredibly stupid. I was so scared, I felt my heart was going to beat out of my chest while on the verge of passing out.” His voice was raw with emotion, the shame and regret he felt clear in every word.

Bringing his head up, Lucas forced himself to take deep breaths, trying to contain his emotions. “Vincent stayed behind as the rest left to take care of something else. He made sure I was okay and patched me up the best he could.” Lucas let out a heavy sigh, his eyes downcast. “Vincent had an idea that might make Samson forgive me. A far better plan than death. He spoke to Samson on the phone about it - that I was now hooked, and it would be a worse punishment for me to cut me off completely.”

“Why didn’t he just say what you were to him?” I asked desperately, needing to know what they were thinking at that time, “Why couldn’t Vincent come out and say you’re part of his circle? Why the secrecy?”

“It would have done more harm than good. Samson controls everyone around him. If Samson had known that I was

Vincent's circle member, do you think he wouldn't use that against him? He could have gotten Vincent to do anything." Lucas shook his head as I said nothing. "But that wasn't good enough for Samson anyway. He wanted more, something permanent. If I was to live, I would be made an example."

Jaxson's voice crawled over my skin, '*Samson could turn his eyes on her as retaliation.*' I couldn't stop the shiver from overtaking my body.

"So it was Samson's idea to burn you?" I thought it was Vincent's, but I still couldn't forgive him. It was still his choice to scar him!

Lucas nodded, "Vincent gave me a choice. He gave me all the paths he could think of, run or burn, and I chose this." He said, rubbing at his scarred leg. "I would rather burn than run, Grace. I just found one of my circle members, and I wanted to experience it. Vincent couldn't leave, and I wanted to be there for him. I wanted to live and would do it again if it came to it."

"I can't believe for a second that burning your leg was the best outcome. I can't even-"

"It's okay."

"None of this is okay!" I stood up, unable to sit and hear what was coming out of his mouth. The walls around me were closing in. "They hurt you! They drugged you and did so many awful things! Then to add to it, Vincent - our circle member - believed burning your leg was the best thing to do!"



I paced back and forth, my heart racing as I tried to process everything Lucas was telling me. The anger inside me was boiling, threatening to burst out in a fiery explosion.

How could they have let this happen to him?

How could they have let Samson's sick plan unfold without even trying to stop it?

"I can't believe that was the only way!" I growled, the frustration and anger clear in my voice.

Lucas just shrugged, and I could see the sadness in his eyes. "There might have been, Guppy. But we were just kids playing a dangerous game. What were we supposed to do, run away? Where would we even go with what little money we had?"

"Vincent has money," I pointed out.

"The money he made selling drugs? Or his family's money?" Lucas asked, shaking his head. "Even if his family had helped, they would have expected something in return. They're not the kind of people who give out freebies."

My frustration grew with each passing moment.

"But you didn't even try!" I exclaimed, unable to contain my emotions any longer.

As I stared at Lucas with frustration, he looked back at me with a sad and pitying expression. It made my blood boil. I wasn't violent, but at that moment, I wanted nothing more than to wipe that look off his face.

“You don’t understand,” Lucas said softly, his voice laced with a hint of desperation. “This is a lot more complicated than you think, Grace.”

“I am sick and tired of you both telling me I don’t understand! Uncomplicate it to me because, as an outsider looking in, I can see it very clearly!” I snapped, my tone sharp and cutting. “We have to go to the police.”

“No, Grace.” Lucas shook his head, his eyes betraying his fear.

I couldn’t understand why he would defend his torturer like that. Was he scared? Didn’t he know my family and I could protect him now? My mind raced with questions and doubts.

“We can’t.” He said seriously, his voice heavy with a sense of finality.

“Why not?” I hissed.

“Because of Vincent foremost. If their operation gets uncovered, Vincent will go down with them. He would be sent to jail, and I can’t and won’t have that.” A look of determination was hot in Lucas’s eyes, “I won’t ever let that happen. I can’t lose you or him. I just can’t.”

“I will then,” I declared, pulling Officer Cody’s card from my pocket. If Vincent wanted to be a criminal, he had to live with the consequences.

“Grace, stop,” Lucas’s voice was firm as he grabbed my arm to face him.

“We can’t allow this criminal to do this. I don’t want to live here, always looking behind me in worry.”

“If you go to the police, you *will* always have to look behind you. You don’t just stroll into the police station and say, ‘Hey, Officer Cody, I would like to inform you about the drug trade in town!’ It’s a fucking crime ring, Grace. They have eyes and ears everywhere,” Lucas said, his voice laced with fear and frustration.

“But they have to be stopped.”

“Grace, some things are best to be ignored. Because that is what the police will do if you go to them.”

“What, why?”

They were the police. Their whole purpose was to stop the bad people!

“Because some of the cops are in the pocket of Samson. The warehouse, Grace. The warehouse was a soap factory owned by the town’s founder family, Mr. Boyd. A Mr. Samson Boyd,” Lucas said, his voice trailing off as he spoke.

I then knew that we were way over our heads.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### LUCAS

**M**y eyes fluttered open, and I was momentarily disoriented, the world around me a blur. Slowly, the sterile white walls of the hospital room came into focus, and the beeping of the machines next to me registered in my ears.

As I turned my head, I saw Vincent straightening himself in his chair upon realizing I was awake. He looked tired, drained even, his eyes rimmed with dark circles.

I tried to sit up, but a sharp pain shot through my side, a harsh reminder of why I was here. My breath hitched as I winced, trying to hold back a groan.

I was getting better, but I still hurt like a bitch.

“Welcome back,” Vincent’s words were a cool balm, and it made my burning stomach ease slightly from only his voice.

“How long?” I asked, my voice hoarse and scratchy.

My mind was a jumbled mess, struggling to make sense of the situation. Was it day or night? I had no idea, but the room was cast in darkness by thick curtains that were drawn. The

only light in the room came from the small TV on the wall, but I couldn't make out what was on the screen.

“You've been out for an entire day which wasn't surprising. Pain meds always make you sleep deeply.” Vincent replied, glancing at his watch. “It's four in the afternoon.”

My body ached with exhaustion and pain, and my head throbbed with every beat of my heart. As Vincent handed me a tall glass of water, I took a sip and was momentarily relieved before the discomfort quickly started creeping back in. My head pounded, and my stomach churned, making me feel like I was going to be sick.

“I feel like shit,” I said, wincing.

“You look like it,” Vincent spoke stoically.

“Nice,” I mumbled sarcastically, unable to resist a small smile. It wasn't even five minutes before he stopped pulling his punches.

Vincent offered to call the nurse, but I shook my head. I wasn't in the mood to be poked and prodded again by strangers. I was more concerned for my circle than myself at this moment.

As we stared at each other in silence, I couldn't help but feel a sense of *deja vu*. It had been years since we were in this exact position, me in a hospital bed while he stood by my side. But this time, it felt worse. A dark cloud loomed over my circle, and I knew I was the cause of it.

Then, in the dim light, I noticed Grace lying on the couch to my right. Asleep, curled into a ball, like she was trying to shield herself against the world with a frown on her face. Feeling inside my chest, I knew her dreams weren't her safe place anymore. Her tenseness ached my own chest with its rigidity.

The once lively light her spirit usually produced was now dimmed by my mistakes.

"She finally fell asleep an hour ago," Vincent said, breaking the heavy silence. "I'm assuming you told her everything?"

I nodded, unable to speak, knowing my voice would be a trembling mess.

Yeah, I told her everything, and watching the confusion and hopelessness on her face broke me even more. She is done with everything, and I couldn't blame her for it.

"I overheard her parents talking about therapy for her," Vincent spoke brutally, and I felt a sharp pang of regret in my chest.

*You always were worried you would ruin her...*

Now that fear had become a reality, and it was tearing me apart inside.

"Do you remember what happened?" Vincent asked, coming to sit on my bed. His gray eyes held me like a prisoner as he took me all in. It was then I realized I felt him inside me. His coldness was all over me, observing for any signs of something.

Instinctively I reached out to him, wanting to touch the very soul that was mine alone, but as soon as we connected, we both shivered at the sensitivity, and Vincent was quick to pull away.

“We had a fight, I think?” I said, my voice barely above a whisper as I tried not to show my disappointment.

“You were high and came up with the brilliant idea of trying to get Grace to do sexual favors for me,” Vincent said, his tone laced with bitterness.

I cringed, recalling my great plan, “I never have the greatest ideas when I’m like that.”

“You never have great ideas, to begin with.” Vincent retorted. His annoyance was crystal clear, and he obviously wanted to take me down with him.

“I just woke up,” I groaned, pressing my head into the pillow to escape his biting words. “Can we save the lecture for later?”

“You survived death,” Vincent reminded me, his voice softening slightly. “I think you can manage a few harsh words compared to that.”

“Did I really die?” I whispered, feeling a chill run down my spine.

It felt strange to know I had died. It didn’t feel possible.

“Yes,” Vincent said before looking away toward our sleeping Grace. His long neck showed him trying to swallow

down whatever emotion was trying to bubble out of him. “We both felt it.”

I closed my eyes, the weight of my guilt nearly suffocating me. “I’m sorry.”

Vincent’s anger was palpable as he stood up. His hands were clenched into fists, and I could see his jaw tightening with frustration. It was clear that my actions had deeply hurt him.

I knew what was coming.

“You promised, Lucas,” he said, his voice laced with disappointment.

“I’m sorry,” I said again, but I felt like my words meant nothing at this point. Grace made sure that they meant nothing.

*I need to do better.*

“You promised!” Vincent’s fists tightened, trembling with anger. Shaking his head, he began to pace before looking at the curtains of my window, facing away from me. His back was tense as he struggled to contain his rage. “When you got clean last time, you promised to never touch the stuff again.”

“I tried,” I said, my voice barely above a whisper. It was true. I tried to stay clean and be the person my circle deserved.

Vincent snapped round and faced me, “You didn’t try! You never asked for help!”

“I tried!” I protested, my voice rising with frustration. “You’ve been more distant, angrier- hell fucking bitter since



we found Grace. Every time I tried to tell you, you just said you didn't want me around." The hurt and rejection I felt poured out of me.

"You really think I wouldn't have come to you if you'd told me you were struggling again?" Vincent's shoulders dropped.

"Would you?" I asked because I felt like I couldn't. I could see the hurt in Vincent's eyes, which broke my heart.

"You really think that..." His eyes widened as he came to a shocked realization. "Shit." He breathed out, running his hands through his hair.

"Am I really that bad?" The anger in his voice was gone, replaced by a tone of self-doubt and regret. Vincent took a deep breath and sat back down, his body slumping with exhaustion and looking towards Grace.

"She was right." His voice was barely above a whisper, but the defeat in his tone was unmistakable. He stared at her with a longing I hadn't seen him express before.

"What happened?" I asked because Grace's anger wasn't only directed toward me. I had felt her soul's furiousness directed towards him also. It wasn't just the fact he had burned me that made her this angry. There was something more there.

Vincent didn't even flinch, "Nothing." His voice was flat, devoid of emotion, and I knew he was lying.

"Don't lie to me. What happened?"

He shifted uncomfortably, his eyes darting away from mine. "It's nothing you need to worry about. Just focus on your

recovery.”

I let out a string of curses, feeling a wave of guilt and shame wash over me. “Now I know what Grace had to put up with. Please, Vincent, just be honest with me,” I begged, desperation creeping into my voice.

I was starting to see what Grace was saying about trust. We really didn’t have it.

His eyes went straight to the white tile floor. A small furrow twitched above his right eye while I noticed his shoulder curling in on him slightly. Vincent didn’t say anything for a while, and just as I was about to go at him, he spoke.

“We had a disagreement, and words were said.” He said it didn’t affect him, but he wasn’t fooling anyone. “She opened my eyes to a few things.”

*He wasn’t the only one...* I thought sadly.

“Yeah? Like what?” I asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

“That I’m an asshole.” he spat out sourly, glaring away from me.

A sudden chuckle escaped me, making me clutch my stomach in pain. “I’ve been telling you that for years.” I groaned out, trying to lighten the mood, but the pain in Vincent’s eyes made it hard to find any humor in the situation.

Then, his next words were like a punch in the stomach. “I owe Samson money.”

“Fuck.” I muttered with the realization of what he was saying. “Because of me.”

“Because I’m your circle member, and I will protect you. Jaxson was sniffing around while you were asleep and found the bag. I had to do something, so I made a deal. I have the money to pay him back. It was my own fault anyway.”

“I stole the bag. Let me pay the price.”

I couldn’t lie and say I wasn’t scared. The last time I paid, it had cost me my leg, but I would do it if it meant the safety of my circle.

“I’m going to back out.” Vincent muttered, “After I pay him. I’m going to leave. I should have left when you got caught up in all of this. I’ve hurt my circle too much from my selfishness.”

I could feel his surety as he said his words bringing a wave of hope.

*Was he seriously going to leave them this time?*

His eyes returned to Grace, and I could see the pain and regret on his face. “Her words are sharper than she realizes.”

“Yeah...” I trailed off, remembering her words to me. “I feel like she has to when dealing with us.”

“The truth is painful.” Vincent looked down at his hands as he rubbed them together, his voice barely above a whisper. “She basically told me I’m a selfish, self-centered asshole who only cares about myself.” His words hung heavy in the air, and I could feel the weight of his pain.

His eyes were downcast, and his hands were shaking slightly. He was trying to be strong, to protect us, but I knew that the weight of his actions was heavy on his shoulders. I wanted to reach out to him, to tell him that it wasn't his fault, but the words wouldn't come.

“And you know what? She's not wrong. I've been so focused on my problems and desires that I've hurt everyone around me. I thought I was keeping you both safe doing whatever Samson wanted, but....” Vincent's voice cracked with emotion, and I could see the shame and regret etched on his face as he shook his head. “She hasn't said a word to me since.”

“I'm sure she will talk to you soon.” I tried to reassure him, but I wasn't sure if it was enough.

“Am I that much of a cold bastard that my own circle doesn't think I care about them?” Vincent's voice trembled with self-doubt and guilt.

He huffed a cold laugh when I said nothing, “I can't deny how painful that feels.”

His eyes met mine for a moment, and I could see the raw vulnerability and fear in them. Clearly, he was struggling with his own demons, and I wasn't sure if I could do anything to help him.

“I know I'm not the easiest to love,” I started, but the look on Vincent's face cut me off. His expression was tense, and his eyes narrowed with frustration.

“Enough,” he said sharply. “Don’t start with that self-pity bullshit.”

I could feel the heat rising in my cheeks, anger and hurt growing inside me. “Jesus, on my death bed, and still you act like a fucking asshole. I’ve been laying here listening to your pity party!” I spat out, unable to contain my frustration any longer. “No wonder you make me question if you love me or not!”

Vincent’s face twisted, his voice low and trembling. “You’re not on your fucking deathbed, Lucas. But if you were up and walking, I would punch you to knock some sense into you. Saying shit like I don’t love you. You think it didn’t kill me to feel you dying like that? I felt you ripping from my chest. You don’t think I have spent hours staying up at night making sure I can still feel you? Thinking over and over about every mistake I have made, not only with you but with her?”

Tears stung my eyes as I took in the raw emotion in Vincent’s voice, but I refused to cry,

“So go ahead,” he continued, “You can think I don’t love you because I know for a fact I do. But if it’s pity you want, you’re not getting it from me. I’m completely fine with you thinking that when I know the truth.”

“Let it all out now, why don’t you,” I muttered bitterly, feeling a sense of helplessness wash over me. I hated that I couldn’t control my emotions and was always at the mercy of my own frailty.

“You know what? I think I will,” Vincent replied, his voice cracking with emotion. “There are so many things I wish to say and do to you. I wish I could scream and shout and express my anger, my fury, and my love for you. I wish I could punch you right now, hurt you to show you how much pain and agony I am in.” Vincent’s glare was intense, his body tense with unspoken emotion.

“But I can’t,” he continued, his shoulders dropping as he fell back into his chair and rubbed his eyes. “I’m not like you or Grace. I find it difficult to express it all, but I still have feelings.” He clutched his chest, his voice was hoarse with pain. “It hurts all the time. This misery of a bond inside me always reminds me of what I did to you that night. Constantly punishing me.”

I could see the agony on Vincent’s face, the weight of his regret and sorrow.

“Vincent,” I began, my voice barely above a longing whisper.

“I’m so sorry, Lucas,” he interrupted, his voice shaking with emotion. “I’m so sorry that you’re back in this hospital bed again because of me.”

My heart sank as I saw Vincent breaking down. The sight of him in such a vulnerable state was heartbreaking. I wanted to do something, anything, to make him feel better. But at this moment, I had no idea what to do. This wasn’t the confident, self-assured Vincent that I knew, and I wasn’t sure if I liked

seeing him like this. I just wanted to hug, kiss, and shake him till he returned to his senses.

My thoughts were interrupted as I panicked, not knowing how to respond to Vincent's confession of guilt.

"You are such a complete asshole." I lashed out in frustration but then took a deep breath, trying to control my anger. "But you're our asshole. All I was going to say was that even though I'm not the easiest to love, you, unfortunately, have me loving you. You fucking idiot!" I growled out, glaring at him.

He wanted to punch me, well I wanted to punch him!

Vincent froze, only able to blink at me like a deer in headlights.

"Jeez, you go on about me not listening while you basically chew me a new asshole," I muttered, feeling a little bit sulky.

I wanted to scream, yell, hell, even cry, but this dickwad of a circle member was it for me. I knew no one else in the world would like him apart from his circle. He knew it, I knew it, and now, even Grace was starting to know it. He was stuck with us, the only people that liked him, flaws and all. I knew what he said was the truth, and I heard him loud and clear. Even though his words hurt, it was a necessary step towards the real truth.

*Our circle must be the most fucking delusional circle out there,* I thought with a chuckle, which I instantly regretted as the pain in my stomach ached.

“What are you laughing at? Should I be concerned that you slipped something in your drip bag?” Vincent quipped.

Yeah, ouch, but the fucker had a right to be suspicious, I guess.

*Asshole.*

I knew he was a bit salty with me for pointing out his hypocrisy,

“Thinking about our circle. The two we haven’t found. Do you think they’re messed up too? I mean, they have to be to like you,” I said, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

Vincent raised an eyebrow, “You think Grace is messed up?”

*Okay, fucker got me there.*

I felt a pang of guilt wash over me. Grace was the kindest and most understanding person I knew, yet she was part of us.

I shrugged, “A little. I mean, she must be crazy to put up with us.”

“You want to know what I think our circle is going to be made of?” He asked, leaning forward to rest his chin on his knuckles.

And just like that, we were okay again. Vincent and I would always bash heads, but we were a unit. I would always have his back, and I knew he would always have mine. It is what I loved about him.



“People who run away. Each of us, you, me, and Grace. We all are running away from stuff. Grace from her circle and you from your fear of being abandoned.”

I scoffed but didn't deny it, “What are you running from?”

Vincent looked up at me and gave a soft sigh before answering, “Myself. I hate what I have become these past few years.”

“You have gotten better,” I reassured him.

Vincent gave a small smile, showing his amusement, before his eyes went to Grace again. “But not good enough. I got caught up in the game of it. I liked the control the job gave me. The feeling of being more. A purpose in my boring life but,” he sighed, closing his eyes with a defeated posture, “I should have left as soon as we found each other. I am sorry, Lucas. I'm sorry for everything.”

“I'm sorry too,” I said, my heart aching for my friend. I would continue to say sorry to the end of time if I had to.

Vincent's eyes returned to Grace, and the longing in his eyes became more apparent.

“She will forgive us,” I said, reassuring both of us. “We might need to do some groveling for a time, but that's better than being dead, am I right?”

My attempt at humor fell flat like Vincent's face as he gave me a deadpan look. I cleared my throat, feeling embarrassed.

“I love you,” I blurted out before he could get a chance to go at me again. My heart was pounding, and my palms were

sweaty.

Vincent blinked for a moment. The shock on his face quickly gave way to a warm crackling ice that I felt coming off him. I didn't say it often enough to him, and I felt guilty for holding back. Even though he never expressed it, Vincent needed the type of love I wanted, and I was always happy to give it.

His lip twitched as he sent me a soft look before shyly mumbling, "I love you too." The warmth in his voice was like a balm to my soul.

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Sparkling blues, exactly like mine, stared back at me. My mom's smile was wide and full of life, just like the other pictures in my house, but in these, she was a lot younger.

I couldn't stop smiling as I gazed through each picture of the story of my mom and Brenda's youth. The pictures showed them both wearing neon clothes in nightclubs, woods, and pools and even passed out in an empty bathtub together. Their hair was wild and full of knots. Each shot showed them without a care in the world as they partied through life.

Like my mom's smile, the pictures were vibrant and full of life. It was as if she was still alive in each one, frozen in time.

I could almost hear the thumping bass of the nightclubs and the sounds of laughter echoing through the woods. The pictures captured moments of the pure joy of two friends who lived to the fullest without any regrets. I couldn't help but feel

a sense of awe and admiration for my mom and Brenda. They were rebels, living on their own terms and not caring what anyone thought.

*My mom was cool*, I thought as my eyes lingered on a picture of her lying on a dance floor filled with foam bubbles hugging a younger, wilder Brenda in her arms.

“Who would have thought the young Brenda Millington was such a party animal. I wonder what people would give to have this evidence.” I muttered, causing Brenda, sitting next to me, to roll her eyes.

We were sitting on my hospital bed. Brenda had causally sat next to me and started to look through it while giving me a side-eye. The woman knew what she was doing, and as soon as I saw the first picture of my mother at my age, I was hooked.

We hadn't moved as I slowly went through the big leather binder as we waited for the okay from the doctor for me to leave. I was leaving this place today, even if I had to bribe the nurses to help me escape.

“Things were different back then,” Brenda said with a soft smile, her finger trailing over the glossy picture as her eyes lingered, soaking in old memories.

Turning to another page, I saw a photo of my parents - young, happy, and carefree. It was a snapshot of a love that had been so strong, pure, and real. My dad was embracing my mom from behind, and she was staring at the camera, always

looking right in the center, while he watched her like she was his whole world.

*She was his world.*

A morbid image of Grace turning into my dad entered my mind. My eyes instinctively went toward Grace, who was lying on the couch. She stared at the tv, not really seeing, completely in her own mind. She hasn't smiled since that night.

A cold sweat started to grow the longer I watched her. The pit of guilt in my stomach deepened. I wanted to reach out, to say I was here, but I knew she wasn't ready to hear me.

*I had to show her.*

"Your father found her first," Brenda explained, pulling my eyes back to the picture. "From what she told me, he simply touched her arm to get her attention to ask her a question."

"He found her first but had me last." The bitterness in my voice surprised even me. I couldn't help but feel like I had been robbed of something precious, something that could have been mine.

"From what I heard, he felt so privileged to have met her first that he said he could wait."

*He didn't wait long enough...*

If I wasn't here, she would still be. Doing more, bringing life and happiness wherever she went. The complete opposite to me. No wonder my dad was so lost. His light had completely gone out.

“You’ve got to face him at some point,” Brenda murmured while clearly doing her voodoo mind-reading trick she was an expert at.

“Things would have been different if she was alive,” I muttered.

“I’m sure they would have,” Brenda said softly, her hand resting on my arm comfortingly. “But she’s not, and life goes on.”

“It’s unfair,” I said, my voice catching in my throat.

Brenda laughed, a full and hearty sound that seemed out of place in the somber room. “Oh, yes. Life is incredibly unfair. But it’s what you make of it that counts. You can’t rely on others to make it great for you.”

“I need to see him,” I said, finally making a choice before I took back my words.

“Okay,” she said with acceptance. “Okay. Me and Tobias will come with you and collect your things once the doctor gives you the all-clear.” She didn’t need to say it out loud, but I heard it clearly: we will come with you as support and backup.

*Shit, so soon?*

Here I thought it would be next month or something further away. Not today!

“I’m going to make a quick call to Graham,” Brenda said, rising to her feet with her phone in hand. Before she left, she picked up a pile of letters that had been scattered among the

album's pages. "You should read this one. It's one of my favorites."

"You did have email when you were my age, you know," I snarked, trying to lighten the mood.

Brenda chuckled. "Yes, but letters feel more personal," she said, leaning down to kiss my forehead.

Her touch left a warmth in my chest that I tried to ignore, a feeling that was both comforting and uncomfortable at the same time. I wrinkled my nose but said nothing as she backed away and gave Grace a kiss as well as she left.

Yep, nothing to say at all.

Looking down at the letter Brenda had left me, I felt a mixture of emotions - curiosity, anticipation, and a twinge of sadness. Most definitely fear, which was ridiculous. Who the hell was scared of words?

Obviously, me.

Taking a deep breath, I read the letter.

*Brenda,*

*It's been a while since we last wrote, and I must admit nothing has been happening till now. Liam is currently running and talking up a storm. He is growing so quickly that it hurts my heart to see him older and turning into a young man with his own thoughts and opinions (A four-year-old tantrum is no laughing matter!).*

*My precious Laura is a darling. She is mostly attached to my hip and refuses anyone else to hold her apart from me. I can't lie and say I don't feel a little smug at being the favorite right now.*

*But for what I wanted to write to you about!*

*I'M PREGNANT!*

*Can you believe it? After another year of trying to conceive with Theo, we finally have another little bundle of joy!*

*I'm over the moon and cannot wait to meet them! Though I may be getting a little excited as I have already bought bags of newborn clothes and picked a few baby names already!*

*What do you think of Larry for a boy or Lydia for a girl?*

*You know how bad I am at naming!*

*Please, please, pleeeeeeease let me come visit! I need to be around women. I'm suffocating with my circle's constant hovering! It's only a month in. God help me when I hit the ninth month!*

*It's like being pregnant with Liam all over again!*

*Miss and love you lots!*

*Your friend,*

*Susan*

*P.S*

*I will be squeezing Apollo into their name even if they turn out to be a girl!*

*My circle be damned!*

I don't know how many times I reread her words. Each time they brought a new wave of emotions crashing over me. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest, my throat tightening as I struggled to hold back tears. It was like my mother was speaking directly to me, even though I had never heard her voice before. Through her writing, I could tell she was a loud and proud person, filled with excitement at the prospect of having me.

But would she still feel the same knowing how it ended?

I wanted to reach out to her, tell her about my life, and ask her about her hopes and dreams. But all I had were these letters, these small snippets of her life that she had left behind. It was like grasping at straws, trying to piece together a picture of someone who was no longer here. It felt unfair like I had been robbed of the chance to really get to know her.



As I reached the end of the letter again, I wiped my wet cheeks and took a deep breath, trying to calm my emotions down. But even as I tried to push my feelings aside, they swelled around me like a whirlpool pulling me under.

“Lucas?” Brenda’s voice jolted me from surprise.

Shit, I didn’t hear her come back in.

I quickly wiped away the last tears and tried composing myself before turning to face Brenda. She gave me a sympathetic look, and I could see the concern etched on her face.

“Are you okay?” she asked softly.

“Yeah,” I sniffled, ignoring the rising embarrassment at being caught. “She seems like she was an excitable person,” I said, my voice cracking slightly as I tried to focus on something other than my own pain.

“Oh, she was,” Brenda replied, her eyes sparkling with a fond memory. “She was a whirlwind and got us into trouble many times at school.”

A small smile tugged at the corners of my lips as I pictured my mother as a vibrant and rebellious teenager. But as Brenda’s hand lingered on my back, I felt a pang of sadness, knowing that I could never experience that side of my mother firsthand.

“I guess we have that in common.”

“You have more in common than you think, Lucas. She would be proud of you,” Brenda said, her voice soft and

reassuring. “And so incredibly sad to see you suffering like this.”

Looking over at Grace, I was surprised to see her watching us with concern. It seemed she was back from the deep corners of her mind and was now alert as her soul softly wrapped around me, comforting me. I could feel the warmth of her love and support, which made me feel a little less alone in my grief.

Sniffing, I looked away to quickly wipe my tears before a small chuckle escaped me. “What the hell was she thinking calling me Larry!”



*Why was this hard?* I thought, looking at the front door of the house I had lived in all my life.

I didn't know why I felt a rising sadness at leaving the place I always wanted to escape from. It wasn't even pretty to look at with my gaze sweeping over the unkept front garden that had always been an eyesore. Weeds and junk littered the area, and the brick path that once led to the front door was cracked and stained with wet paper clumps. It reflected the chaos and disarray that reigned inside the house.

It wasn't my home, but it was familiar.

“We will go in, collect your things, and leave if that's what you want to do.” Brenda reminded me for the fifth time since we left the hospital.

As much as I wanted to grab my things and leave, I knew I couldn't. I had to talk to my dad, whether it was for the last time or not.

With Tobias's hand on my neck, I took a deep breath and let him guide me to the front door. His presence was a comforting weight on my shoulders, and I was grateful for it.

As we stepped inside, my dad's voice rang out in alarm.

"Apollo," Dad's voice was high as he stared at the three of us entering. The sound of his voice was like a jolt to my system, bringing me back to reality and reminding me of what I was about to face.

I froze, feeling a lump forming in my throat. What was the right thing to say? How could I explain to him that I needed to leave? What the hell did you say to a parent when you were leaving the nest?

"Go pack your belongings, Lucas," Brenda ordered me softly, probably knowing I was panicking now that I was here.

I refused to look at my dad's questioning look as I went past him.

As I opened the door, the smell of vomit hit me, and I recoiled in disgust. Everything looked normal, apart from the center of my room, where there was a large stain on the carpet and the small window that had been opened.

Knowing I died in here made the room hold an edge to it that was never there before. It was as if the room was haunted

by my death, and I couldn't shake the feeling that it had left a permanent mark on everything in it.

Did death have a smell? Because from now on, it would forever be represented by the smell of my bedroom.

A new memory hit me of me stumbling and curling in on myself on the floor. The phone was in my hand, but no one answered.

My hands shook as I rummaged through my closet, trying to gather my things as quickly as possible. I didn't want to stay here any longer than I had to. I quickly got my clothes together and left everything else. I didn't want to bring anything to my new home. The thought of tainting that place more than I already had curled my insides. I certainly wouldn't be allowed to bring any weed either.

I was a little grateful for the overpowering acidic smell. Otherwise, I knew the scent of skunk would be heavy in here. It was practically embedded in the walls at this point.

"I cannot blame you for your grief. But I can't forgive your neglect of your son." Brenda whispered from the kitchen as I came back, bag in hand. Her voice was heavy with sorrow and regret.

I could tell she hated the words she uttered, but she was a woman who needed to say things that she felt.

"It wasn't his fault she died, Theo, and it's not your fault either. Susan wanted children. She wanted one from each of you. That was her choice. She would be ashamed to see her

circle treating her youngest son, her flesh and blood, like this. She would be so incredibly sad how her circle couldn't cope without her."

Dad's face crumpled as his lip wobbled while tears flowed from his eyes.

"It's just been hard." Dad gasped for breath while my other dad gripped him, supporting him, "I- we miss her so much."

I could tell Brenda wanted to comfort him. Of course, anyone would, especially at the thought of their own circle member dying.

A sour pit grew in my stomach at the thought of Grace and Vincent, who had experienced that loss.

*Never again.* I thought with purpose.

*'Just words,' Grace's voice echoed in my mind, her words heavy with the weight of grief.*

"You both need professional help," Brenda's voice was filled with genuine concern as she looked at my dads. Yet, despite the kindness in her voice, there was a noticeable firmness that conveyed the gravity of the situation. "I can give you a number to an experienced doctor who specializes in bond grief. It's okay to ask for help, and it's nothing to be ashamed of."

My dad's remained silent, their faces etched with pain and sadness. I could feel the weight of their loss in the heavy silence that filled the room.

Brenda turned to me, offering a small smile as she spoke, “We will be outside waiting for you.”

I nodded as Brenda and Tobias left, leaving my dads and me to stand in heavy silence, all of us looking at each other with guilt. But I knew there wasn't anything to say at this point.

I understood Grace more than ever in feeling done because there was nothing to say to them until they took the first step to get better, and I hoped they would seek help.

They couldn't continue like this.

“Please get help,” I said thickly, knowing this was my last chance to plead with them. “You both deserve to be happy and healthy... It's what she would have wanted.” It felt odd talking about my mother like I knew her, but deep down, I knew she would've wanted me to say this to them.

Pulling out the leather photo album, I gave it to my dad. His teary eyes looked down in confusion before he opened it without speaking.

His whole body froze at the sight of my younger mother. There were pictures in there he had never seen before, and the way his eyes lit up, soaking in all the new images of his dead soulmate, I knew I had made the right choice giving it to him.

“You need this more than I do,” I said honestly. I would know who my mother was from her other letters; I didn't need the pictures. But my dad needed to reflect on these memories more than I did. He needed to be reminded of who he used to be.

Tears seeped and rolled down his cheeks as he struggled to take a deep breath. But even with his struggle to breathe, his blue eyes never looked clearer than they did now. They sparkled with a hint of life that was trying to push the dull away.

“Lucas,” he choked, clutching at the leather-bound book filled with his lost love, “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too.” I said honestly, “I know I haven’t been the best son.”

“I wanted to come to the hospital to see you, but...”

“I get it, Dad. Just focus on getting better. I do love you.”

“I love you too,” he said, quickly pulling me into a tight hug. His skinny arms wrapped around me so tight that I could feel him not wanting me to go. We hugged for a long time, and I gladly allowed us to embrace.

“Thanks for not allowing her to call me Larry,” I whispered in his ear as we stepped apart.

A light swept over his face, and for the first time, I heard a joyful chuckle escape him. “She was set on that name until the last few months.”

I gave a small smile before the daunting realization that this might be the last time seeing him. I wouldn’t see him until he changed, for his sake and mine.

“Goodbye, dad.”

He gave a watery smile in return as his tears ran freely, “Goodbye, Lucas. I hope you get what you need.”

I nodded, feeling another type of acceptance flow through me as I watched my dad look back down lovingly at the book that would never love him back. My dad’s grief was just who he is. He had fallen into a rabbit hole chasing for the missing piece he desperately wanted back. Instead, he ignored his pain and filled it with a mediocre copy.

It is funny to think that I was doing everything in my path to avoid becoming him, but I was the exact same.

*It’s time to break the cycle.* I thought to myself. I felt the determination solidify inside me, like a soldier preparing for battle. I wasn’t stupid to think I could change overnight, but I was willing to fight.

*To take action.*

“I need a moment,” I whispered to Brenda as I came out of the house, “I want to walk back, to think if that’s okay?”

Tobias and Brenda looked back at me with an understanding look, giving me warm smiles of encouragement.

*God, I hated them sometimes.* I thought, ignoring the warmth I felt from their looks.

“Okay, we will see you back at home. And don’t stray, I know how long it takes to walk from here to our house... You, sir, are still under my watch.”

“What are you going to do, frisk me?” I asked sarcastically. I knew Tobias heard me by the way he slammed his door shut



a little too forcefully.

“Don’t give him ideas,” Brenda said, entering my personal space. “Take this time for yourself, as I expect this will be the last time you will be allowed to be alone for a long time. Be safe, and know we are proud of you, Lucas.”

*Fucking hell.*

I just couldn’t with these two, yet that didn’t stop the smile from forming on my lips as I started my walk.



*Just do it, you dick!* My mind cursed me as I stood at the door, looking like a complete idiot. It has been years since I came to this side of town.

I could hear the chatter and yells inside. Part of me wanted to turn back, not wanting to witness a happy family, while another part just didn’t want the rejection I deserved.

Gritting my teeth. I forced myself to ring their doorbell and tried not to roll my eyes at the cheery song ringing throughout the house.

“Apollo!” Mrs. Richenberg looked shocked at me being here. I hadn’t stepped foot in this place since I was twelve, one of the many times Kristina invited me to dinner back then, but then I started to slowly resent the way their family smiled and the warmth they showed. I stopped coming here since I couldn’t stomach it.

“Hey,” I smiled weakly. My body still ached, and I couldn’t find the strength to force myself to be happy. “I’m sorry to bother you guys... but is Kristina here? I have something for her.”

“Of course! Come in, come in!” She gestured with her hand, beckoning me inside.

But I couldn’t.

“It’s just a quick visit,” I explained with a nervous smile when she gave me a questioning look when I didn’t enter.

“Oh, okay!” She gave me a warm, encouraging look before turning and shouting for Kristina.

I grimaced at the open scowl on Kristina’s face when she saw it was me at their front door. She was now back looking like herself with her tamed ginger frizzy hair straightened. The bags under her eyes and the exhausted look were gone from her face. She now looked refreshed and ready to fight.

Just my damn luck,

“I’ll leave you two kids alone.” Kristina’s mother offered another warm smile as she gave a loving head pat to her daughter.

*Sickening.*

“Thanks, Ma.” She said sweetly before glaring back at me, crossing her arms as soon as her mother was out of sight. “I heard you were in the hospital.”

“Not one of my finest moments.” I chuckled, rubbing the back of my head as I questioned my life choices up to this point. “But yeah, I’ll be okay.”

“Didn’t ask.” she retorted, her tone cutting.

*Okay, ouch.*

Well, here goes nothing.

“I came to apologize. I was incredibly selfish. I don’t want to lose our friendship. We have been friends for so long, and I hope my actions haven’t changed that.”

“You *are* a selfish asshole.” she shot back.

“I’m trying to be real here,” I whined.

“I know,” Kristina said, her lips twisting into a sly smile. “I like seeing you squirm. It’s like you’ve never apologized before.”

“It’s basically my love language at this point with Grace,” I muttered under my breath,

“And Vincent,” Kristina added, her smile widening.

“If you keep going, I will need another visit to the hospital.” Fine, let’s start at the beginning if she is going to be difficult. “Kristina, we didn’t mean to deceive you. I’m sorry if we ever made you feel that way.”

“I don’t feel deceived. I understand why some people would want to keep things quiet.” She shrugged, picking at her nail like this wasn’t a difficult conversation for me.

I paused, tilting my head as I gave her my questioning look. I didn't expect her to agree with Vincent, of all people.

Shaking my head, I tried to rein in some type of dignity.

“Look, I came here to apologize for how badly I treated you. But Grace has said I tend to say shit and then don't mean it. So instead of words, I'm trying actions... So... I made you something.”

My hand went into the bag I took with me. The soft thickness of the blue wool bundle was starting to bring me comfort. Part of me didn't want to give away my first creation. While the other didn't from both embarrassment and pride.

“I was under some drugs- controlled by the nurses. So, it went a little wonky and holey.” I held out the long scarf I had knitted.

“You knitted me a scarf?” Her eyebrows rose in surprise as she took it from me slowly, “In the hospital?”

“Grace's father made me choose an activity....” I started to trail off as a part of me wanted to not admit my issues. But I forced myself onwards, “To choose an activity for me to distract myself from....”

*God, why was it so difficult!*

People knew I took drugs before, but saying it aloud was another ball game. My throat burned like I had just swallowed acid. Even my body trembled, shaking to stop the words from coming out.

“Drugs.” I choked out, “To stop me thinking about drugs.” I sighed, feeling intense relief.

“It’s shit,” Kristina said with a playful smirk. But I knew then she was giving me an opening to mend our friendship.

“It’s my first one!” I said with great fake offense. “Do you know how hard it is to twiddle those long needle things?”

“No, I’m not an old woman.”

“I’ll have you know that it’s quite a popular hobby,” I said snippily, completely offended at her lack of respect for my new craft.

“I appreciate the scarf, and if this is how you’re going to apologize, you need to make a shit ton more.”

I whined, instinctively flexing my hands as they cramped at the thought.

“But at least you would be a master at the end.” Kristina joked as she wrapped the tatted strings of fabric around her neck. I winced as a large hole was noticeable.

*Well, she accepted it, no take backsies.*

“Well... I’m sorry again.” I said awkwardly, shuffling backward as Kristina nodded, still fiddling with her new scarf.

Turning, I hurried out of there before she could throw it back in my face.

“Lucas,” Kristina called out, making me turn back to face her. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

I felt my shoulder drop with relief, and this time I didn't have to use any energy to give her my wide smile as I shouted back, "Didn't ask."



Tobias stood at the front door, his frown low and arms crossed. Ahh, fuck. It took a little over an hour to get back, and now I was wondering if he would search me for drugs because I was late back.

But instead, Tobias just greeted me, "Lucas, welcome to your personal hell."

"Not the welcoming I was expecting. But a welcoming nevertheless." I uttered while walking inside, and just like that, the grumpy old bastard eased his shoulders, allowing me to be enveloped in the safety of his home.

No-*My* new home.

Shit, that's going to take time to get used to.

"Lucas!" Brenda greeted me, pulling me into a tight hug like she hadn't seen me nearly an hour ago. "Are you hungry?"

"He doesn't need to eat more than the necessary intake," Tobias muttered flatly as he walked past us.

"Speak for yourself. He's a growing boy. He needs the energy to grow." Graham commented, following but sending me a wink.

I stood in the foyer, unable to grasp that I was now living with the Millington's. I had been avoiding this place, but now,

I was to be a part of it.

*I didn't want to mess this up.*

“How are you feeling?” Grace’s voice asked softly from behind me.

My first instinct was to lie. The need to reassure her I was fine was at the tip of my tongue.

*Honest communication, my mind ordered.*

“I’m scared,” I said honestly as we both watched Phillip come down the stairs and sent us a warm look as he also went into the kitchen.

Okay, more like downright terrified, but I couldn’t change overnight. Small steps.

Knowing what was about to happen in the following weeks had set an uneasy dread in me that was building. The heat sweats were already happening, and soon I would be in a lot of pain.

Grace’s soft hands grabbed mine, her soul filled my chest, giving me the support I didn’t know I needed.

“What about you?” I asked, feeling her unease. Everyone knew just how different she’d been acting. It often felt like she was lost and adrift while her terror kept her captive, even from me.

“I don’t know how to make things better.” She whispered.

“I would say I would help.”

“No,” Grace said curtly. “No more helping like that, not until we are all on the same path.”

“Okay,” but I then noticed her eyes glazing over as a tremble of terror was smothering her from within, “Hey,” I touched her chin, forcing her to truly see me in the now. “Things will get better. Just wait for me before going forward, okay?”

“I could never leave you behind, Lucas,” she said softly, her eyes glimmering with unshed tears as her light dimmed from the new fear in her. Yet she was the one reassuring me. “You have been there for me even before we knew we were part of a circle.

“I love you.” I whispered my truth to her, “I know my words don’t mean anything to you right now. But I promise you, Grace. I will get better. I will show you. No more lies, hiding, dishonesty, and cover ups. You will get me on a platter, all exposed and shit.”

I wrinkled my nose at the thought.

“Now I’m thinking of those human sushi plates.”

Grace’s laugh was like a soft jingle of bells, lighting my insides up. I couldn’t help but feel a sense of pride in making her laugh for the first time since coming out of the hospital.

I felt like fucking superman.

“Come on, you two.” Rodger’s voice brought our heads around to see him smirking at us with a knowing smile, “We can’t start till you both are at the table.”



“That’s a thing?” I whispered in alarm as we both made our way into the kitchen.

As we sat down, the doorbell rang throughout the house. Everyone paused, looking at each other with confusion, making it seem like they didn’t get many visitors in the first place.

“Who could that be?” Brenda muttered, getting up from the table, her slim brow coming down with confusion.

We all watched Brenda go to the front door with Tobias close to her heel. It wasn’t long before they came back, but with an extra person following in tow.

Vincent entered, looking completely unfazed at the glare Tobias was giving him.

His cool gaze instantly went to Grace. His eyes traveled down her body, checking that every limb was still attached. Ten fingers, ten toes checked. His icy heart melted slightly before he openly scowled at me when he noticed me smiling his way.

I guess I wasn’t the only one taking action today.

“This boy is here for you, Grace,” Brenda spoke slowly, her eyes going between the three of us. A knowing look glinted in her eyes.

*She so knew.*

Vincent now sent his frown towards Brenda. He hated being called ‘boy.’

*Ahh, love for the in-laws already,* I thought with a mental chuckle.

Grace sent a quick, panicked, and confused look at me at the sight of Vincent. Her wide eyes looked to me to save her with her plump lips slightly open in horror. I couldn't stop the swelling of pride at her need for me.

*I'm right here, Guppy.*

I itched to touch her, to ease her. Her emotions were like the wings of a hummingbird, fluttering in quick succession. I watched as my brave soulmate gave Vincent a questioning look as her hand sought out mine from under the table.

"I... We..." Grace stumbled all the while, her hand squeezing mine, stopping any chance of blood flow. Looking down at it, it was currently paper white, and I was starting to feel like she might break it if she added more pressure.

"My apologies for intruding on your dinner," Vincent said coolly, looking over at all of Grace's parents and giving a small head bow.

*Such a fucking suck up.*

"My name is Vincent Gushiken. I've come here to announce that I am part of your daughter's circle."

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## ABOUT AUTHOR

Elizabeth Read is an English woman living in the Scandinavian country of Sweden with her husband and miniature schnauzer doggo. When not writing she is either daydreaming or managing her reading addiction.

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