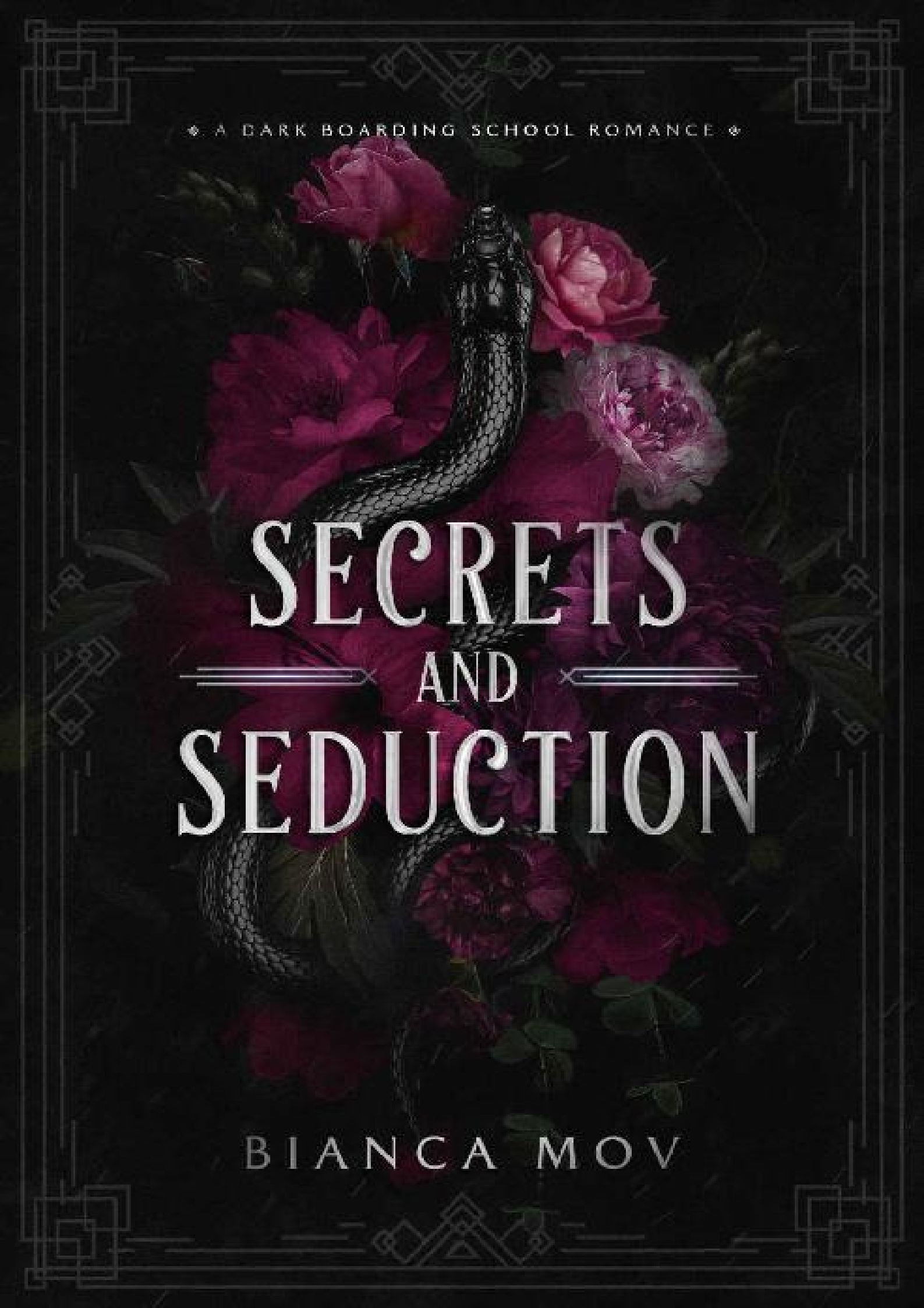


◆ A DARK BOARDING SCHOOL ROMANCE ◆



SECRETS
AND
SEDUCTION

BIANCA MOV

SECRETS AND SEDUCTION

PRESTON ACADEMY BOOK 1

BIANCA MOV

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www.bianca-movileanu.com

Waagner-Biro-Straße 47

8020, Graz

Österreich

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*FOR ALL MY GOOD GIRLS WHO FANTASIZED ABOUT THEIR TEACHER
AND ALL THE BAD ONES WHO ACTED ON IT*

PROLOGUE

I flinched as the cop pushed me against his car, the cold handcuffs digging into my wrists, which made my fingers twitch uncontrollably. I could still smell the scent of burned wood on my hoodie, making me shiver when I thought about the reason I found myself in this situation.

“We contacted your father. He should be here any minute. I would advise you not to say anything,” he murmured from behind me. I shook my head, not planning to tell them any details about this night anyway.

Today I had sealed my fate. I knew that I would most likely end up in juvenile prison. Did you still go to juvenile prison when you were twenty? No, I don’t think so. Even my father couldn’t get me out of this.

As I opened my eyes, I saw our neighbor lying in the ambulance, her skin all burned. I didn’t think she was conscious—at least her eyes were closed. Or was she dead? Had I killed her?

No, her chest was moving irregularly, but still up and down. Her little daughter was sitting next to her. She seemed calm, almost at peace. Good.

With a dull thud, the ambulance door closed, and I was finally able to avert my gaze. Just when everything around me went quiet, two bright lights came towards us—my father, I realized. The engine went off and he hurried in my direction.

“What the hell is going on?” He tried to push to my side, but the second cop stopped him at the last second.

“The list is long—arson, aggravated battery, burglary, resisting and obstructing officers in the performance of their duties and endangering minors.” My father fixed me with his piercing eyes, searching for injuries that were not there.

“Avery would never. Let go of her,” he said, almost baring his teeth. All furious, he wanted to push the bulky officer next to me away—in vain.

But his colleague was right, though. It was me, all of it. And I didn’t regret it. It was so much fun to see that building crumble, to see how that monster almost burned alive. I savored every second.



NERVOUSLY, I walked up and down in front of the prosecutor’s office, waiting for my lawyer and my father. Of course, I didn’t expect to get off lightly. I had destroyed that house and now had to live with the consequences. I just hoped that my cellmate wouldn’t kill me in my sleep.

I jerked as they yanked the door open, and my escorts stepped out of the room with a tense expression.

My father passed me without notice. He refused to talk to me since that night. I understood that. I wouldn’t want to talk to me either.

“I have good news and I have bad news,” my lawyer said. I kept step with the bald man, eyeing him out of the corner of my eye. “The good news is you don’t have to go to juvenile prison.”

I didn’t dare to feel relieved, not when his voice sounded like he was about to give me the death sentence. “The bad news is you have to participate in a special program for troubled teens. A boarding school, if you will.”

A boarding school? I already finished high school, even went to college for a year before dropping out. What the hell should I be doing at a boarding school full of kids who did who knows what?

“So, doing math to combat crime, I guess?” I joked. My lawyer chuckled barely audibly.

“Yeah, something like that. If you behave, you’ll get out in one year. It cost your father a fortune to keep you out of prison. Never forget that.”

Guilt spread through my heart thinking about how he must have felt. If only he knew the real reason for what I had done...

I sighed. “A boarding school it is, then.” Just one year, what could possibly happen?

I looked after my father as he drove off the campus of the boarding school without giving me one last glance.

For it being the beginning of October, the weather was still quite mild. Single rays of sunlight penetrated through the cloud cover and warmed my face. It smelled of freshly mowed lawn and flowers that were nowhere to be seen.

As peaceful as it looked outside, the main building seemed creepy. The stone facade was dark and covered with moss while some scary-looking statues lined every corner. A dark aura radiated from this place. I just couldn't tell whether it fascinated or repulsed me.

I pulled a pack of cigarettes out of the pocket of my coat and lit one up. Who knows if they would take my stuff. I wanted to enjoy my last free minutes before I became the guinea pig for their new *project*.

The familiar taste of burned tobacco spread through my mouth, and I almost smiled as I thought of the reason I stood on their grounds, looking at the fancy entrance with ornate wooden elements. I didn't care if everyone here judged me, if they thought I was a ruthless criminal. I was used to having no friends anyway, so I embraced the idea of having my peace for a year.

With a sigh, I dropped the butt and dragged my luggage with me to the entrance. My knuckles didn't have time to touch the bulky door before a tall lady with a pale face and a

stern expression opened it. I took a step back and studied her from top to bottom, which apparently displeased her.

“Avery James?” she asked dryly.

“Yes. You must be the principal, right?” She didn’t give me more than a brief nod before opening the door wider so I could enter.

The view almost left me speechless. All the furniture was kept in dark wood tones. Everywhere you turned, it was bursting with history and culture. Paintings, books—I didn’t know where to look first.

A few steps further, a huge common room lines with couches and tables stretched out in front of me. They even had a real fireplace and an expensive-looking chandelier which cast dim light through the open space. It looked cozy and spooky at the same time.

“Are you sure I’m at the right address? This place looks nothing like an undercover prison for rebellious kids.”

The principal just kept walking, not giving me time to stop and explore my surroundings.

“We found this boarding school to give young people a new perspective on life, not to lock them up. However, someone who doesn’t follow our rules, disrespects the staff or causes harm to other students, will be punished or sent back home, where they can face the court once again.”

I followed her for a while until we turned into a wider and better lit hallway and disappeared into her office. My fingers twitched from carrying the heavy luggage and I put my hands in the pocket of my coat.

She gestured for me to take a seat and I gratefully followed her call. My legs ached from this short distance alone.

“Here’s a binder with all the information you’ll need for all of your time here. You can find the house rules down there.” She pointed to the top sheet.

I read through the page. *No alcohol, no drugs*—obviously. But no phone or television?

“How can I contact my father?” I almost screamed. Panic welled up inside of me, heart skipping a beat.

She pulled out a device from one of her drawers that strongly looked like a large cell phone or a small tablet.

“This is your replacement. It’s programmed so that you can call home once a week. We’ll even provide you with a boarding school social platform. Each student has a profile that they can use to communicate with other students and, if need be, with faculty. However, if our goodwill is being exploited, this privilege will be lost.”

I nodded, just thankful for the possibility of talking to him, well...someday. “Here, you will find your schedule tailored to your knowledge and needs. Since you have already missed one month, you will be assigned a tutor whom you will meet a few times a week.”

A tutor? That had to be a poor joke. It was not enough that I had to spend a year in this pretty prison. No, the little free time I still had, I should spend with another professor.

“Thank you,” was the only thing I got out. She nodded briefly, couldn’t force even a small smile.

The principle, I noticed, was a bear you shouldn’t provoke. I just wondered what might have been behind her strict facade.

“Alright. Since we’ve cleared these things up, I’ll send you to the nurse to give you a health check and run some blood tests. It’s a standard procedure. After that, you can go to your room on the west wing. There is where the girls are staying. Your roommate will show you the rest.”

I looked down at the floor plan. With all the twists and turns, I would surely get lost ten times, I thought to myself.

The principal rose and held out her hand to me in farewell. I returned the gesture, applying just enough pressure to let her know that her cold nature did not intimidate me.

“One last note, Miss James: I expect you to be on your best behavior. My eyes and ears are everywhere.”

I gave her a smile that did not reach my eyes.

“I bet they are.” With that, I handed her my phone and my pack of cigarettes and disappeared through the wooden door.



SWEATY AND OUT OF BREATH, I had finally reached my room. As I had feared, I had turned in circles a few times until I found the west wing.

I still couldn't get over the elegance of this place. Despite its darkness, the aftertaste of pure seduction lurked in every corner. I just didn't know what to make of it.

With my back straight, I entered the room that would be my home for the next 365 days. I had no wish for a roommate, preferred to be on my own. Far too much disappointment clung to my heart for me to open up. Maybe I didn't *want* to open up. I was probably a freak to them. But weren't we all here?

I put my luggage down next to the free bed while looking around.

Our room was not spacious, but it had a rustic charm. The colors of the tapestry had already faded, leaving only a vague reminder of the flowers on it.

There were two rather small beds on the opposite sides of each other, separated by a large window with plenty of sunlight coming through. Apparently, I was supposed to share the closet with my roommate, but looking at the carefully folded uniform on the bed, we didn't need much space, anyway.

With a deep sigh, I dropped onto the bed. One year—they wouldn't skin me alive. I was a criminal, just like them.

I jumped when the door to the neighboring room—the bathroom—opened. It had been so quiet that I had not heard someone coming.

“Well, hello, Anakin Skywalker,” a girl with short, black hair and sharp features said.

I instinctively wanted to reach for the scar, but stopped myself at the last moment.

“Avery.” She reached out to me and gave me a charming smile that showed off her perfect teeth.

“Leilah,” she returned with a wink. “I hope you’re not going cold turkey right now, as pale as you are.”

I shook my head. “So, this is the boarding school for troubled teens.”

“Crazy, right? Although you don’t look like a teenager. How much did your dad pay for you to do your time here?” she asked.

“I’m twenty,” I returned, rolling my eyes. “And a lot. You don’t exactly look like fifteen, either.”

“I have my ways.” She opened the closet and proudly presented me with the empty half. “I did this just for you. Usually, I hate roommates, but when I read your file, I got curious. Pretty long list, not to mention your mugshot. Your smile was priceless.”

The thought, the *smell*, of that night lit up my mood.

The thrill that these memories had given me was all too quickly overshadowed by her previous statement.

She knew everything about me, every detail. “You can just read each other’s files here?” I asked, perplexed.

Leilah gave me a knowing look. “Of course not. That doesn’t mean I can’t get my hands on them. Don’t worry, I won’t say anything. Besides, don’t talk to classmates about their past stuff, anyway. You’d better keep a low profile.”

Even though she crossed a line, I was grateful for her advice. Of course, I didn’t want to mess with anyone here. Not if they had done God knows what.

“What are you waiting for? Get dressed, I’ll show you the campus and all the important classrooms,” she said and pushed me along with my uniform into the bathroom.

Hesitantly, I followed her order and disappeared behind the squeaky door.



WE WALKED THROUGH A BARREN GARDEN, the flowers already in their winter sleep. Only the rustling of the leaves under our shoes broke the silence between us.

There was something raw, something unspoiled about this landscape, and yet a silent warning lurked in every corner you entered. Even the gaunt trees and sparse high hedges silently urged one to behave, to make no mistake.

The casual uniform was not much different from the normal one. Both included a skirt too long for my taste, tights, a blouse or sweater, and a pair of ugly black boots that stopped below the knee. In addition, they gave us a coat that reminded more of a potato sack.

However, I had expected it to be worse. In real prison, my outfit would be far more unflattering.

“We have some of the classes together, I made sure of that. Don’t worry, most people here are okay. Still, you’d better stick with me for now,” Leilah said, looking off into the distance, as if spotting something on the horizon.

Secretly, I was glad to have met someone like her right at the beginning. But I did not believe that we would ever become friends. All too soon we would part ways anyway and to spare myself the heartache of saying goodbye, I didn’t want to form deep friendships.

“Are we allowed to leave campus, go into the city?” I asked.

The nearest city wasn’t exactly within walking distance but being permitted to move around freely was good enough for me.

She shook her head. “Every two weeks, we’re allowed to go out for a few hours. If you’re late, you get expelled immediately.” Pretty radical, I’ll give them that. Not that I had

any plans to spend my nights drowning my sorrow in alcohol. Those times were over.

At that thought, my fingers twitched involuntarily in the pocket of my coat. I brushed it off and kept walking.

The icy breeze made me shiver. Or was that the feeling of being watched? Probably I was just paranoid, but I could feel someone's eyes on me, someone analyzing my every move.

“Let's go, it's getting dark,” my roommate urged, and I sighed in relief. This freezing mountain air was not for me.

Only a few minutes later, we stepped inside, again surrounded by the mysterious beauty of this school.

“Tomorrow is your first day. We have classes until the afternoon. After that, you will meet with your tutor. He will teach you some of the stuff you missed.” Right—tutor. I had completely forgotten about that.

“How is he? The tutor, I mean,” I asked, while I leaned on the wooden gallery railing and looked down into the common room.

Leilah snorted in amusement.

“Oh, you'll find out soon enough.” I arched a brow, unable to make sense of her reaction.

But one thing was certain—she had sparked my curiosity.

I was jolted out of my far too light sleep when Leilah shook me aggressively by the arm.

“Get up right now. We’re running late,” she exclaimed.

We had stayed up way past midnight and I could barely get a clear thought out so early in the morning. The bed was too hard and apparently the heater wasn’t working properly because I was freezing even in my thick pajamas and down comforter.

“It’s another two hours until first period starts,” I returned, annoyed, and was about to lie back down when she pulled the cover off my body.

“Every morning we have a brief church service. Then everyone meets in the cafeteria. They give those who oversleep extra chores. I don’t feel like spending my free time scrubbing floors.”

With an annoyed groan, I pulled myself together and walked past her into the bathroom. Church service? Religion had never played a big role in my upbringing, and I wasn’t interested in their cult, either. Anyway, I got ready in record time and stepped back into our bedroom, a little sullen.

“The skirt is way too long. It looks hideous,” I stated, as I looked at Leilah’s. Hers was shorter, accentuating her long legs.

She put one hand on her hip and looked me up and down.

“I’ll fix it after class. Comb your hair, you look terrible.” I turned to the mirror and ran my hand over my face. My roommate hadn’t exaggerated. I was pale, had dark circles under my eyes, and my former curls resembled more of a bird’s nest.

There was no time to make myself more presentable, so I did the bare minimum and detangled my hair. A few moments later, we sprinted with our satchels towards the hall where they were holding the service.

I had underestimated the long way. My sweater scratched, and my boots rubbed uncomfortably against my toes. With all my effort, I tried to keep my scowl in check. The first impression shouldn’t be of a cornered puppy. Fortunately, the few classmates in the hallway paid no attention to us. Good.

Just as the bell went off, we reached the great hall. The floor was of marble, and enormous chandeliers hung from the ceiling. Long pews were lined up in front of the altar, which was dotted with ikons and candles. Musicians played sinister songs I had never heard before, which made the hairs on the back of my neck rise.

A strange darkness lurked in every corner of this room, threatening to seduce one into the brutal abyss of oneself. Somehow, it was comforting.

We took a seat away from the crowd and set our satchels down on the polished floor.

“Just in time,” I gasped, out of breath. Leilah nodded.

Right when I was about to add something, a lovely voice sounded at the altar—a young woman, dark blonde and picture perfect.

She wore a tight black turtleneck dress that went down to her knees. Her hair was half up, which gave her face an aristocratic touch.

I allowed myself one last look at her figure before sitting back and pretending to follow the prayer. More than once I had to stop myself from nodding off.

The music of the organ coupled with the sound of her voice drove me further and further into the sweet embrace of oblivion.

I was startled when Leilah elbowed me. Excited whispers broke out, students rose from their pews and hurried out toward the cafeteria.

Just in time, my stomach responded with a loud growl.

“Good thing Ms. Arden didn’t see you drooling all over my shoulder. Come on, let’s hurry or the nicest food will already be gone,” she said grumpily, lifting the heavy satchel off the floor. I rolled my eyes at her exaggerated remark, but finally rose and walked forward.

I wondered if all the faculty looked as good as Ms. Arden.



WE WERE JUST GETTING in line when two guys approached us. They didn’t look bad, especially the taller one, whose hair seemed almost silver in the light.

The other one was more muscular, with a charming smile. His dark skin brought out his honey eyes and I couldn’t help but to smirk back at him.

“Oh, Avery, meet Caleb and Noah. Caleb is my brother’s best friend and Noah is in the same class as us.”

Caleb looked slightly older than his brunette friend and I couldn’t help but ask myself why they ended up here.

“It’s my pleasure to meet you,” Noah said, and kissed the back of my hand. I let him, unsure if he was flirting or just being silly.

“Nice to meet you too,” I replied while looking at Leilah, who gave Caleb a look little sisters shouldn’t give to their brother’s best friend.

I wondered what was going on between the two of them and if they were just pretending to be mere friends in public. Either way, it was none of my business.

“I heard Mr. Preston will be your tutor. Good luck with that.” A devilish grin spread across his face. I tilted my head, unable to make sense of his cryptic words. Just as I was about to open my mouth, the line moved, and it was our turn.

“Preston like in the Preston Academy?” He nodded.

“Don’t listen to Noah. Mr. Preston is very...intriguing,” Leilah butted in, and I shook my head.

“Serial killers are intriguing too, yet you’d better stay out of their way.” Caleb snorted in amusement. Obviously, he was the quieter one. Good choice, Leilah, I thought to myself.

Packed with food that smelled nothing like the cafeteria garbage at my old high school, we walked past chatting students. Other than a handful of them who were staring far too obviously at my face, no one was paying me any attention.

Our small group gathered around a round wooden table, where cutlery and napkins have already been placed. I took a sip of coffee and almost burned my lips.

The guys were engrossed in some conversation while Leilah scrolled on her little tablet. Apparently, the social platform was popular for students because she was going through dozens of posts and photos.

“Anything interesting?” I asked with my mouth full. She just shrugged.

“The usual—sexy pics, gossip, and asking if anyone can copy the homework.” I smirked.

“People really ask on a platform that teachers have access to if they can copy off someone’s homework?” My roommate put the device down on the table.

“They don’t read through that shit. Especially not in their free time. No teacher does that voluntarily.”

I took mine out and pressed on the app with the school’s crest.

Welcome to Preston Academy was written in elegant script in front of a picture full of carefree students.

A box popped up where you could enter your access information.

“The log-in information is in the papers you got on your first day,” Leilah said. I dug them out of my satchel and filled in the required data.

I could barely read a handful of posts before a lovely melody sounded and everyone rose to hurry to their classes.

Hastily we strode along the long corridors, passed paintings and busts that seemed somehow creepy in the dim light, and finally arrived. The classroom was not particularly large, but the elegance still lingered.

It smelled of old leather and dust, which was probably because of the many old books that covered two walls.

The three of us took our seats next to each other in the back row. I pulled out a notebook and some pens. Teaching psychology and manipulation to criminal students must have been a macabre joke by the faculty, otherwise I couldn't explain the choice of curriculum.

As if at the push of a button, everything went quiet around me, the heated conversations already over.

My pen fell to the floor, and I bent down to pick it up. Just in time, the professor came rushing in.

At first, I only saw the tips of his shoes until my gaze wandered further and further up and finally remained fixed on his face.

His inky black hair was a little curly at the ends, his face chiseled and yet there was something angelic about it.

He was built well, yes, but he didn't have the broad frame of a man who spent too much time at the gym. The white button-down shirt stretched slightly around his upper arms and the dark gray smart pants fit perfectly around his hips.

He looked at me and I could have sworn that something in his expression shifted, at least for a moment, before his eyes resumed their icy darkness.

The professor turned his back on us and wrote something on the blackboard in jagged letters. I took this moment of his inattention and turned to Leilah.

“How old is this guy, exactly?” I tried to speak as quietly as possible—in vain.

“Stand up,” Mr. Preston hissed. I could hardly believe my ears. I had never heard that bossy tone from any professor.

I raised an eyebrow. Who did he think he was?

“I told you to stand up. Are you hard of hearing or has all the smoke dulled your mind?”

My mouth fell open, and I clenched my fists. Anger spread like fire through my chest, and I almost went for him. I barely refrained from commenting. It would not be a good omen to make an enemy of the professor on the very first day, so I grudgingly followed his demand.

“Go on, what did you say to her? We surely are all eager to know,” he said mockingly. When I didn’t reply, he took a step towards me, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

I didn’t let his attitude bring me down, didn’t let him make me feel inferior, so I gave him my most charming smile and answered, “I was just wondering how old you are.” A devilish smirk spread across his face.

“Old enough to be your professor. Sit down.” Without another word, he turned his attention back to the blackboard.

Indeed, very *intriguing*.

After lunch, I had a date with my obnoxious tutor. He was nice to look at, yes, but his shitty character ruined his beauty.

I knocked twice. Stupidly, I had gotten lost twice before I found this room, so I was pretty late.

Without waiting for an answer, I opened the door and walked in. It smelled of fine whiskey and cigarette smoke. I inhaled, missing the taste of burned tobacco on my tongue.

Mr. Preston looked up from his stack of papers in annoyance, surveyed me for a few moments, and looked back down.

“Do you want me to sit down?” I asked as I looked around the small office.

Apparently, he didn’t care for order, because his stuff was all over the place. Bookshelves covered three entire walls. They were so packed that I was afraid they might collapse at any moment. But what amazed me most was the piano in the corner. Dust had already collected on the dark polish, a sad reflection of the fact that no one here valued music.

“Do what you want, as long as you keep your mouth shut,” he said, without giving me a second look.

“But I thought you were tutoring me.” He snorted.

“Do you think I’m wasting my time giving you private lessons?”

I didn't answer his question and was about to turn and leave when he started talking again.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"You said you wouldn't tutor me. I assumed that would mean I was dismissed."

"You assumed wrong. Sit down and do your homework or whatever."

Disappointed, I trudged to his desk and sat down across from him.

"I don't have homework," I retorted. What was the purpose of this meeting? Obviously, he had no interest in teaching me anything and I had even less interest in spending my free time with him.

He exhaled slowly. It was almost as if even my mere presence irritated him. Then he dug out a white string from one of his drawers—headphones, I realized.

What was this all about?

"Just listen to music." I plugged them into my tablet and put them on, my eyes fixed on his face the entire time.

Finally, he broke our eye contact, so I leaned back in the leather armchair, chose my favorite song and looked at the ceiling, tracing the painting in my mind.

The loud music made me forget my surroundings. I remembered a time when I could play this song even in my sleep, when my fingers had not betrayed me.

As if in mockery, my index finger twitched, and I hated myself for indulging in old memories. They brought me nothing but heartache and sorrow.

A strange warmth spread across my chest, snaking along my neck and arms. I knew my professor was watching me, felt his eyes on my skin, and let him have his way.

I didn't know how long I sat there, whether I had dozed off or the music had just clouded my mind, but suddenly Mr.

Preston was towering over me. I narrowed my eyes and took one headphone out of my ear.

“Class is over. Go back to your room,” he said dryly.

I rose, straightened my skirt, and picked up my satchel. But before I turned to leave, I looked into his bright blue eyes one last time. That color could defy any beach in the world, I had to admit to myself.

“Thank you for your help. My horizons had been widened. I can’t wait for our next meeting, professor.”

With those words, I walked away.



CONFUSED, I awoke from a dreamless sleep, not sure how much time had passed. When I had briefly lain down after my tutoring session, it had still been light outside. From the window, I could guess that the moon was now at its zenith.

Judging by Leila’s snoring, she was sleeping soundly. With half-open eyes, I pulled out my tablet and looked at the time—just after midnight. Despite the exhaustion of the last few days, I felt wide awake. Sleep was out of the question, so I made a very stupid decision and sneaked out.

The door squeaked, making the hairs on the back of my neck rise. I was almost afraid I had woken my roommate up, but when my ear hit the cold wood, I heard nothing.

For just such cases, I had told her that I sometimes sleepwalked and shouldn’t be woken up. Better safe than sorry.

The hallways seemed even creepier at this hour. The cold draft made me freeze, and I cursed myself for not having put on something thicker.

Only my footsteps broke the silence. Sporadically lit candles showed me the way deeper and deeper into the heart of the academy. My fingertips ran along the old tapestry,

traced the rough surface of the stone pillars. It was peaceful; I could have spent the entire night like this.

I was admiring a portrait of a lovely young woman when suddenly I heard something from the distance—footsteps, almost silent but fast. *Fuck*. Clearly, I would not have a night to myself.

With my heart pounding wildly, I crept in the opposite direction, trying to move in the shadows the candles had cast.

The feeling of being prey did not subside, no matter how far I moved away from the source of the noise. It was almost as if this strange aura alarmed all my human instincts. I turned left and there....

A narrow wooden door with iron ornaments appeared before my eyes. I didn't have time to think but let myself be driven by the fear of being caught and disappeared into the pitch black closet.

The adrenaline had taken my breath away. I rested against the stone wall, counting back in my mind from a hundred. At some point, the person would disappear, I thought.

It was so quiet you could hear a pin drop, but before I could sneak away, someone pushed the door handle down and I froze.

“What are you doing here so late at night?” a deep, raspy voice sounded. I recognized the intruder immediately—Mr. Preston.

“I couldn't sleep.” He lifted a candle before his face so that the flame illuminated the tiny space.

My professor raised an eyebrow and examined me from top to bottom. Something upset him. I could tell by the way his expression changed.

He took a step closer, letting the door fall into the hinge behind him. A certain danger radiated from him, something that I did not understand, perhaps could never understand. His hair was wild, and he had swapped his professorial attire for something more casual. I inhaled deeply, the air heavy with his unique scent.

“What are *you* doing here on campus so late at night?” I asked to ease the tension in the room.

He snorted, looking utterly arrogant with that expression on his face. “Where do you think the faculty sleep? We live here too, a little off your wings. Besides, I’m free to move around as I please.”

I tried to walk past him, but he blocked my way out, towering over me. “A warning, or rather an order—never wander around at night again.” Mr. Preston took a step closer so that our chest almost touched.

A sort of electricity radiated from his body, and I didn’t know if I liked it or if it scared me.

“What’s going to happen? I’m unlikely to run into any lost souls.” He said nothing in response to my attempt to lighten up the situation.

“Go back to sleep,” my professor ordered tightly and stepped to the side, but before I could finally leave the closet, he took me by my upper arm. His grip was firm around my skin, and yet there was something gentle about his touch. It was almost as if he had to strain not to hurt me, as if that was all he was capable of and yet didn’t want to.

He leaned down, lips almost touching my ear. It felt wrong to be alone with him in such a confined space. And yet there was this thrill of the forbidden that held me back. “Directly.” I fixed my gaze on his much too close face and nodded.

His eyes had lost the hardness, the hatred that seemed to torment him. Instead, only his shell stared back at me, and I could have sworn that there was a spark of fire deep inside of him before it died out.

“Are you going to rat me out to the principal?” I asked, almost whispering out of fear somebody could find us here and draw the wrong conclusions.

He thought for a moment, weighing an answer.

“My aunt doesn’t need to know about our late-night encounter.” I exhaled in relief, unable to suppress a smirk. “Thank you, professor.”

With one last glance, I left him and returned to my room. The draft didn't feel all that cold anymore.



ENDLESS MINUTES OF WALKING LATER, I could finally lie down in bed. Leilah still slept like a log, had not even remotely realized what had happened tonight.

Just as I was about to close my eyes, the display of my tablet brightened. Who would text me, of all people? Especially at this hour?

For a moment, I debated just deleting the message unread—maybe it was just a disgusting dick pic. Sighing, I rolled my eyes.

My curiosity got the better of me, so I half straightened up and read the message.

UNKNOWN:

-attachments-

Here's some homework to help you fall asleep next time.

I pressed my lips together and looked through the files. Dozens of assignments spread out before my eyes, and I cursed myself for ever having set foot outside this room.

AVERY JAMES:

Who is this?

I knew this answer would piss him off. From today on, that would become my favorite pastime—getting on his nerves.

UNKNOWN:

I want you to finish the first 10 pages by the time we meet.

Asshole. I had barely had time to grab a snack before meeting him in his office yesterday.

In resignation, I sighed and put the tablet back in its place. One year, one year, one year.

I fell asleep thinking about freedom.

Noah took a bite of my croissant while I tried to get as many assignments done as possible before the bell rang for first period.

I had never hated church services as much as I did now. Not that I had paid much attention, but just sitting in that cold hall listening to the way-too-perfect Penelope Arden was enough misery for me. Or maybe I was just a bit jealous, who knows?

“Mr. Preston is a real jerk for giving you so much homework. It’s not like you missed much,” Leilah said next to me.

I just shrugged, almost completely blocking out their conversation.

“He has a thing for torturing people,” Noah butted in, to which Caleb gave him a dirty look. What did he mean by that? I looked up from my notebook for the first time.

“Shut up, Noah, or Avery will think Mr. Preston is a cold-blooded murderer.” They looked at each other for a moment before he laughed and dropped the subject.

I was about to ask what they meant by their inappropriate jokes, but by then the bell rang and I packed up my things to go to class.

I had expected that we would have many more classes together, but I wasn’t that lucky. While the three of them were

always together, I had to kill my time with people two or three years younger than me.

Olivia, a classmate I met yesterday, all pale and with dark circles under her eyes, sat down on the free chair next to me. The poor thing looked quite ill.

“Would you like me to walk you to the nurse?” I asked, worried.

Her eyes met mine.

“No, it’s alright, I’m fine. I’m just a little sick.” Her long scarf and thick sweater suggested she was pretty cold. It didn’t look like a mild bout of flu.

“I don’t mind. Come on, let’s go.”

Just as I touched her shoulder, a shiver ran through me. My whole body was urging me to run, to turn my back on her. It was almost as if my mind became all-alert to a nonexistent threat.

“No, it’s alright, I’m fine. I’m just a little sick,” she repeated more forcefully.

I lowered myself back into the chair, creating as much space between us as I could. Do they punish you even for being sick? I couldn’t explain her reaction any other way.

My eyes drifted to her one last time before I turned away and waited for the professor in silence.



ANNOYED, I made my way to the professor’s office. I had spent my brief break doing the rest of the unnecessary homework and was accordingly grumpy because I couldn’t eat.

I was an insufferable person when I was hungry or when someone disturbed me while I was eating. Maybe that was just the predator in all of us.

I knocked once and didn't wait for a response, but stepped right into the stuffy room.

Again, the smell of whiskey and cigarette smoke welcomed me. Maybe this time he would give me one, especially since I had done everything, he had asked of me.

"Sit down." He pointed me to the seat across from him. Today he wore a similar outfit as last time, except that this time his pants were black, and he had swapped his button-down shirt for a sweater.

I took my homework out of my satchel and presented it to him like a trophy, but he didn't even look at it.

"I didn't waste my precious time doing those exercises without you even taking note of them," I said between gritted teeth.

Annoyed, he tore the paper out of my hands, read through a few sentences and threw everything in the trash.

"Happy?" I clenched my hands into fists and would have liked to rip his head off for that.

"I'm anything but happy." He snorted as he sat down across from me.

"Sounds like a you problem." My professor leaned back, watching me to the point where it made me almost feel awkward.

It was as if he could see right into my soul, and I hated it.

"Am I supposed to just sit here and stare at the ceiling again?" I asked, irritated.

"I don't really care what you do."

I arched an eyebrow.

"It didn't seem that way last night."

He propped his elbows on the cherry wood table, leaning toward me. "Tell me, Ms. James, how did it seem last night?" There was something almost hypnotic about his face, his voice.

“It seemed almost like you missed me before I had even taken a step out of that closet.”

As soon as these words left my mouth, I regretted them. How could I say such a thing, especially to a professor who could kick me out of this academy whenever it suited him? Oh God, Avery, you need to learn to keep your fucking mouth shut, I scolded myself.

Instead of him talking down to me for that assumption, and I don't know why I said it in the first place, he laughed. He *laughed*. It seemed almost unnatural, as if his face wasn't made for such a thing.

“Bold. Maybe there's a little backbone in that dull shell after all,” he returned.

You're about to see how dull those fists are as they caress your oh-so-beautiful face. “Play something on the piano,” he demanded out of nowhere.

All life drained from my face. “I can't.” Please, don't force me, I begged silently.

“My papers say quite the opposite.” I dared to look at the elegant piano and shook my head.

“Your idiotic papers know nothing about my life,” I hissed

As if in confirmation, my fingers twitched—something Mr. Preston did not miss. His gaze remained on my hands, and I cursed myself for having lost control over them.

“Play something on the piano, I said.” This time he sounded more dominant, using his authority over me, knowing full well I didn't want to do that.

“I can't,” I exclaimed, holding my hands in the air as proof. “They are broken, are no longer useful. Do you know why? Because I made a little mistake and I'll pay for it for the rest of my artless life.” Thinking about the source of my pain, I found it much too difficult to breathe. Was I having a panic attack? No, please not in front of him...

The devil narrowed his eyes.

“Self-pity doesn’t suit you.” I groaned. My emotions were just a game for him. He probably even enjoyed this scene right now.

“It’s not about self-pity. It’s about my dreams, my wishes and desires. It’s about the future I could have had, that I had taken away from myself.” He clenched his jaw, didn’t bother to acknowledge my sorrow. Perhaps it was better that way.

“I am sure you have no dreams, professor, so you can’t understand my pain. You are bitter and alone, no one to share your pathetic existence. Maybe we have more in common than I thought.”

I knew I shouldn’t have said that, that there would be consequences for my words. But he had hit a sore spot.

I braced myself for his nasty words.

“Play.” Without thinking about it, my fist smacked against his table, causing the glass on top to clink.

He was not impressed by my outburst of anger, held my hateful gaze.

I could see it in his eyes that he was running out of patience, even if a slight hint of amusement lingered. Mr. Preston certainly wouldn’t bat an eye at ratting me out to his aunt. And he certainly didn’t care about the pain in my soul at the thought of my fingers on the ivory.

I took a deep breath, stood up, and straightened my skirt. The piano was waiting for me like an executioner, mocking me with every step.

With trembling hands, I settled down on the bench, feeling my professor’s eyes boring into my back. “Go on,” he demanded.

I brushed over the dusty keys, inevitably thinking back to the time when I had played in front of people admiring my art. *Art*—there was nothing left of it.

With my eyes closed, I struck up the first notes and failed miserably. It was almost as if my fingers wanted to embarrass me at that very moment.

All day they had done what I wanted them to do, but when it came down to it, they betrayed me like a trembling enemy.

“Again,” my professor ordered, and I gritted my teeth.

Unwillingly, I did what he said...and failed again. It sounded as if a child was playing it.

I pulled my hands off the piano as if it had burned me.

“It was on a Friday night,” I mumbled. “It had been pouring. You could hardly see anything on the road. But my *friends* really wanted to go to the gas station to buy snacks, so I drove them,” I began. He probably didn’t even care for my story, but I wanted to tell him anyway. Maybe he would understand me better. „On the way back, one of them got a call saying that we should come to a party. It was already late, and I had an important rehearsal for a concert the next morning, so I wanted to go home.”

I closed my eyes, picturing the night as if it were yesterday. “They were not pleased with my answer. Actually, I don’t think they even liked me that much in first place. We started arguing and then my passenger yanked the steering wheel.”

I remembered the smell of smoke and blood and almost gagged at that memory. “I went off the road. My car rolled over, and we landed in the ditch. I can only remember bits and pieces of what happened after that. But I know they left me to die. All three. None of them had tried to pull me out of the car.”

I turned to him, my eyes wet. “Every time I look in the mirror, I’m reminded of what I’ll never have.”

His nails dug into the leather of the chair, eyes an abyss of hatred and contempt. Only this time it was not directed towards me.

“Fame?” he asked, his voice the epitome of pure menace.

A weak smile crossed my lips.

“Happiness.”

Something in the way he looked at me changed, something I couldn't describe.

My professor cleared his throat and gestured for me to take a seat in front of him again.

“Do the rest of your homework. Then we'll be done for today.”

I nodded in relief. I wouldn't have managed another round of that torment. The bitter feeling of defeat still lurked in the last corner of my heart; the smell of uselessness snaked around my senses—even as I finished the last sentence.

Just as I was leaning back, someone knocked on the door, making me jump. Mr. Preston invited the guest in, and I narrowed my eyes. *Noah*.

“I'm here to pick up Avery. As far as I know, the tutoring session is over now,” he said, flashing his most charming smile.

My professor looked back and forth between us. Something was bothering him, but he quickly regained his composure.

“Go.” With those words, we were dismissed.

But before I could leave, I turned to him one last time.

“I will never forget that you made me play the piano.” The words shot out of me like invisible poison darts, a testament to the hatred I felt at that very moment.

“I insist you don't.” His crooked smile only showed that he was enjoying the scene.

Like a gentleman, Noah had pretended not to pay attention to our conversation, but I knew very well that he had overheard everything.

I was about to throw my satchel over my shoulder when Noah intervened and carried it for me.

“Thanks,” I mumbled and went ahead.

I waited a few moments after we left the office before I broke the silence.

“What are you doing here?”

“What does it look like?” he joked. “I want to spend time with you.”

I didn't know how to respond to that. He was attractive, very attractive in fact, but I didn't want him to get his hopes up. I'd never been in a relationship before, and I wasn't planning on getting into one this year. It would be doomed to fail.

Maybe I was just overreacting or interpreting too much into his gesture. Yes, I certainly did.

We walked down the dim hallways, talking about mundane things and laughing until my stomach hurt. I understood why Noah was so popular. He had a certain aura that pulled everyone in. It was almost as if he was made to wrap everyone around his finger.

“You smell very nice, you know that?”

“Yeah? Like what?” I asked with a raised eyebrow, surprised because I had forgotten to put on perfume today.

“Can't describe it. Everyone smells good in their own way, but for me, you stand out.” He shrugged and I couldn't help but grin.

“Maybe you've just watched *Perfume* too many times,” I said, all playful.

Noah gave me a look I couldn't read.

“Maybe.”

I hadn't noticed how much time had passed when we finally arrived outside my room, the sun almost set. Its golden rays made the dark red tapestry and the wooden ornaments glow, made the chandelier above us glitter as if it was made of millions of diamonds.

“I should go now. It's been a long day. Thanks for helping,” I said after he handed me the bag.

Before I could turn around, he put his hand on my shoulder, stopping me from walking away. His touch gave me

the same feeling I had today with the other classmate. Bizarre. What was wrong with me? As quickly as he had touched me, he pulled away.

I took a step back to put enough distance between us.

“We’re off in two weeks. Let’s go downtown, maybe to a bar,” he proposed with a wide grin.

Noah seemed so confident, so charming and consuming, that I completely forgot about my concern from before.

“Yes,” I breathed. What? No. I didn’t want to. Why did I say that? Afraid of getting myself into more shit, I finally disappeared into my room, leaving my classmate standing in the hallway.

I let my satchel fall to the floor and threw myself on the bed, rubbing my eyes.

What the hell had just happened? Not that I was averse to spending time with Noah, but the way the answer came out of my mouth like it was the most natural thing in the world gave me the creeps.

To be honest, everything about this boarding school, which was more like a luxurious castle with internet access, gave me the creeps. The people were so strange, and the faculty...

I shook my head. Just the nerves, a new place, and new people—that didn’t have to mean anything.

Still, I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was off here.



THE WIND RUFFLED my hair and made me shiver. It was far too cold for my taste as I walked along the gardens. The moon had just shown its face, but it was not yet bedtime, so I used the time to clear my mind.

I sucked in the earthy scent and stared across at the woods that bordered the grounds. It was so damn quiet. You could almost think that even the animals didn’t dare come here.

How I missed the warmth, the sea, sailing.... Me and my dad used to go sailing, just the two of us. The best memories I had were on a boat surrounded by blue and turquoise. *Dad...*

Will he ever forgive me? I sighed and forced myself to think of something else. Inevitably, my thoughts drifted to my professor and today's tutoring session. For the first time in ages, I had sat by a piano, and it had hurt, hurt so badly. The wounds in my heart felt even deeper at such moments.

Sunk in my melancholy, I passed trees and bushes until the school's lights had moved into the far distance. I had not paid attention to the path in front of me when I suddenly stumbled over something soft.

Irritated and with aching knees, I glanced back to see what had made me fall.

A scream of horror came over my numb lips as I looked into Olivia's lifeless eyes. Then I threw up next to her corpse.

I didn't know how long I had been kneeling next to her. It felt like hours before someone grabbed me by the shoulder and I jumped.

Towering over me was Mr. Preston, his hair disheveled as if he had sprinted here.

"She- she's dead. I was just wandering around here and there she was," I stammered, unable to think clearly.

Before he could say anything, I heard footsteps coming closer and closer towards us. Excited murmurs broke out.

"No one comes near," the principal next to me shouted to the crowd. "What happened, girl?" she hissed as if it was my fault.

"I don't know, I-I didn't do that. You have to believe me." I was shaking so violently that my teeth chattered. My limbs were numb, whether from shock or cold, I didn't know.

She clicked her tongue and looked past me to my professor. "Take her to the nurse. When she comes to her senses, I'll talk to her."

Without another word, he pulled me up, but my legs gave way under my weight.

"For God's sake, pull yourself together," he snarled. I could hardly focus on his words. It was almost as if he was speaking to me from far away.

“I’ve never seen a dead body before,” I muttered absently, my eyes involuntarily on my classmate.

Annoyed, he exhaled slowly, grabbed me again and threw me over his shoulder. With effort, I tried to push away from him, but one of his arms pressed my thighs against his chest.

“Put me down, I’m calm, look, I’m calm.” His steely grip only tightened.

“Shut up and stop moving.” His voice allowed no buts.

I tried to fix my skirt so it couldn’t slide up any further, but he slapped my hand away and did it himself. At that moment, I cursed myself for asking Leilah to shorten it for me.

His shoulder pressed into my belly until it almost hurt, but I didn’t dare to say anything. The danger that radiated from him at that moment was deadly, and I didn’t want to draw his wrath on me—not any more than I already had.

He carried me all the way back to the boarding school, and I almost threw up because of the uneven ground and his quick steps. The icy air gave way to a comforting warmth.

The most seductive of scents spread around me, and I had trouble breathing. I didn’t know if it was because of Mr. Preston or the shock, and yet I sucked in the aroma, not wanting to waste any of it.

He picked up his pace, and I became all too aware of his hand that had slid dangerously far up to fix my skirt. His skin was hot in contrast to mine, and I hated myself for the fact that my heart started beating faster.

Before I could do anything stupid, we halted.

“We’re here,” he said as he put me down. In front of us was a white double door, elegant and surely as old as this entire building. I’d been here on my first day.

Mr. Preston knocked, didn’t wait for an answer, and entered. I followed him but tripped because of my numb legs and slammed into his back. “Watch your step,” he hissed, and I rolled my eyes.

An elderly lady came up to us. She had tied her gray hair into a bun and her white nurse's dress was a little too big for her.

“Oh, Alexander, I just got the message. Come here, my dear, I'm sure you must be completely terrified.” She took me by the hand and led me to the examination couch. Everything here was rather sparsely cobbled together. The cupboards were filled with jars of different colored liquids and medicines.

Apparently, they preferred to invest their money in paintings and busts instead of keeping the medical equipment up to date. Well, we were just a bunch of criminals, anyway.

“You can go now. Avery and I will be fine.” Mr. Preston looked at the nurse, his eyes narrowed. She planted her hands on her hips and didn't buckle under his piercing gaze.

“I'll stay here and wait for you to examine Ms. James.” He lowered himself into one of the chairs and watched her every move until even I was uncomfortable.

From here on, it was just a series of standardized questions. She took my blood pressure and temperature and wrapped me in a scratchy blanket.

Finally, she gave me something for my throbbing headache and left the room.

“You don't have to wait for me. I'm sure you're tired. It's been a long day,” I reassured him.

Mr. Preston clicked his tongue.

“Just keep your mouth shut and warm up. We can leave soon.”

I had no strength to argue with him. Right now, a thousand questions were running through my mind, and I doubted I could find a plausible answer to even one of them.

God, I could probably never erase the sight of that body from my memory. I had talked to her just today when she was looking so sick in class, and now she was dead. Who could have done this? Was there a murderer at large? I mean, in this school, it wasn't even that far-fetched.

Determined, I stripped the blanket off me and stood up. I felt much better—physically at least—and if I had to spend another minute in this room, I would go crazy.

“We’re leaving now,” I stated matter-of-factly and walked past Mr. Preston, out into the hallway. I heard his footsteps behind me and was secretly glad I didn’t have to go back to my room alone.

“What kind of monster kills a young, defenseless girl?” I muttered more to myself as I wrapped my arms around my center.

The trembling had stopped, but the coldness in my heart remained. Olivia...

She was a few years younger than me, hadn’t even lived, could never fall in love, grow old. Her parents would be devastated, well, if she had any. Seeing the corpse of a beloved person, I couldn’t live with that.

I wiped over my cheeks discretely.

“Sometimes the monsters are closer to you than you think.”

My gaze shot to him, puzzled by his morbid expression.

“You think we live on a happy farm here and pet ponies all day? There’s danger lurking around every corner. Never forget that. It could cost you your throat.”

I didn’t know what to do with his cryptic words. Of course, we were at an institution for criminal juveniles, but to think that people got murdered here?

“Do you really believe it was one of the students?” He shrugged, but I could see through this facade of indifference, could sense that he was only maintaining it for the sake of my sanity.

“I’m not in a position to make allegations. My aunt will take care of that.”

I brushed my hair out of my face and nodded.

“You think I’m going to get in trouble?” My professor shook his head, and I almost exhaled in relief.

“You’ve already paid the price for your stupid walk today. No one is going to fault you for anything. I’ll make sure of it.”

I couldn’t help but stare at him for a bit too long, really looking at him. His face seemed even more striking in the candlelight, cheekbones and jaw more prominent. When he turned his gaze on me and raised an eyebrow, I looked away.

Fortunately, the door to my room was already in sight. I could hardly wait to wash the dirt and the disgusting feeling off me and then fall asleep and forget everything—at least for a few hours.

But no matter how much I slept, I couldn’t push the strange feeling away that something wasn’t right here.

“What?” he asked, annoyed. “Your expression gives you away.”

I sighed.

“I can’t shake the feeling that something weird is going on here.”

“Like what?” We had arrived, and I looked right and left, making sure no prying ears were listening. They were probably all still downstairs, gawking at Olivia’s lifeless body.

“Do you ever sense some kind of danger coming from people? When I touched her today, it felt...wrong. My whole body was screaming at me to run away.”

I could not believe it was possible, but he became paler than he already was.

“What are you saying?” He took a step closer.

“I think you heard me perfectly fine the first time. Are you trying to make me look like some crazy person?”

Mr. Preston just shook his head and massaged his temples. Perhaps I shouldn’t have spoken so openly after all.

“Just go to sleep. My aunt will talk to you tomorrow. But I wouldn’t recommend revealing your theory in front of her.

Believe me, it's better that way." What was that supposed to mean?

Without warning, he grabbed me by both upper arms and forced me to look at him. His face was so close to mine that I could feel his breath on my skin.

"And no more nighttime walks. Do you hear me?" I nodded, taken aback by his sudden closeness.

With this reassurance, he let go of me and disappeared into the darkness without another word.



WITH DRIPPING hair and a towel wrapped around me, I stepped back into the bedroom. Leilah was not there as usual, and I would have spent all my non-existent money on the fact that her legs were wrapped around Caleb's waist at this very moment.

Good for her. At least one of us had fun.

My tablet vibrated, and I curiously looked at the display, not expecting any message.

UNKNOWN:

Are you alright? A. P.

This question had truly caught me off guard, and I had to compose myself for a moment.

AVERY JAMES:

I'll be fine. It was just a lot today.

I waited for his next message, eager to hear what else he had to say.

UNKNOWN:

You can take tomorrow off. I will talk to your other professors.

I raised an eyebrow, certainly wouldn't have expected such a nice gesture from him.

AVERY JAMES:

Are you tired of me already?

Okay, that message was a little risky, but screw it. He had texted me first, and he didn't have to reply.

A few minutes passed, and I had lost hope for a new message when my tablet vibrated again.

UNKNOWN:

Not yet.

An unknown feeling spread through my chest. I knew neither where it came from nor what it meant.

AVERY JAMES:

Then I'll see you tomorrow at the same time.

Why was I so stupid and turned down a day off? Had this evening shaken me up more than I wanted to admit?

UNKNOWN:

Good night, Avery.

And since it didn't matter anymore, I typed a response that I might regret tomorrow.

AVERY JAMES:

Good night, Alexander.

I threw the tablet on the bed as if it had burned me. As quickly as the high had come, I landed back in reality. The whole evening had been one hell of a horror movie, and I really needed a lot of sleep. Only tomorrow I would be able to truly realize what had happened, and I had to prepare myself for the inevitable paranoia.



The nightmare came as soon as I closed my eyes. I was lying in my own blood, surrounded by people whose faces were so familiar, but still unrecognizable. They looked down at me with a certain hatred and hunger that I had never seen in humans.

Panicked, I tried to get up, but invisible chains held me to the ground. The full moon shone above me, and I prayed I wouldn't have to die tonight.

But a voice deep inside me whispered that today was the day. Then the monsters lunged for me.

I sat in class with Leilah on my left and Noah on my right. She hadn't returned yesterday and judging by her overtired expression, she had gotten little sleep.

Penelope Arden walked into the classroom, gait prideful, hair perfectly blow-dried and skin flawless.

Her gaze, like that of almost everyone this morning, fell on me. Ms. Arden's eyes, which normally shone with fake joy, held a certain hardness today.

Perhaps she was also still taken by the events of the previous night. Most of my classmates were. I could see it in their faces, practically smell their fear. One thing was certain: no one felt safe at Preston Academy anymore.

"Open your book and get out your homework," she said, pulling me out of my grim thoughts.

There was something strange about this woman, a coldness that I couldn't describe.

Noah nudged me with his elbow and pointed out the page they had stopped at last time. Most of the stuff I still knew from high school, so I wasn't too worried about not keeping up.

"Do you have news on the dead girl?" I whispered to Leilah.

She turned her head barely noticeably to face me, her black hair covering part of her eyes.

“You better let it go, Avery.” I frowned. What was that supposed to mean? I literally stumbled across a corpse.

“Doesn’t the school host a mourning ceremony?” My roommate looked at me as if I had just declared the earth was flat.

“We’re just criminals to them. Never expect them to see you as anything but that.”



I QUICKLY STUFFED the last bit of pasta into my mouth before I had to leave for my tutoring session with Mr. Preston.

During the lunch break, I was stared at from all sides. Some whispered shamelessly and others walked past me so rapidly for fear I would hunt them down here in the cafeteria.

Shaking my head, I looked back down at my tablet. My feed on the social platform was overflowing with posts about my classmate. Literal groups with conspiracy theories and questionable explanations were made.

Even my name came up here and there and I read through the comments with amusement. I was many things, but certainly not a murderer.



I KNOCKED BRIEFLY ON MR. Preston’s door and, as usual, did not wait for a response, but entered right away.

A step later, I stopped dead in my tracks, perplexed by the other people in the room—the principal and two police officers.

“Good afternoon, Ms. James. These gentlemen are here to ask you a few questions. Mr. Preston was kind enough to sacrifice some of his tutoring time for this,” she said charmingly, but I saw behind her facade, saw the woman who probably didn’t waste another thought on Olivia.

“Of course. How can I help?” I asked as I let my satchel drop to my feet and sat down in my usual spot.

One policeman, short and around forty, cleared his throat before speaking. He seemed a little nervous. I couldn't blame him. Probably, there has been nothing exciting happening in their town for a long time, and now they're completely stunned by a murder.

“We know you haven't recovered from yesterday's shock, but please tell us what happened and don't leave out any details.”

I swallowed, looked first at the principal, then at Mr. Preston, who had regained his cold, indifferent expression.

It was time to put on my best show. Normally, when I lied, people could see right through me, at least that's what my father claimed. I didn't want them to think I had gone crazy.

I told the policemen what had happened last night but left out the thing about the radiating danger and the creepy aura. Besides, they didn't need to know about the conversation between my professor and me in which I had shared my worries with him.

Meanwhile, his colleague noted all the information and nodded at the relevant parts. Finally, they finished their questioning, packed their things, and left the room with a worried expression on their faces.

“Very well. Go back to work. I expect the same performance from you as from all the other students, murder or not,” she said in a snooty tone.

Before leaving the room, she turned her head in my direction one last time, her gaze wary. “And Ms. James? I have my eyes on you.”

It took all my strength not to roll my eyes. Of course, she had them on me, on all of us, and she made us feel it every day.

Mr. Preston sat down at his elegant desk and pulled out a pack of cigarettes from the drawer. I watched him put one

between his lips and light it. A deep drag later, the familiar scent reached my nostrils and made me sigh.

“May I?” I asked, expecting an extremely annoyed rebuff. But instead of him making a mean comment, he handed me his cigarette like a joint.

I felt the bit of moisture on the butt and couldn't help but think that our lips had touched the same spot. Pull yourself together, Avery, I scolded myself.

He looked at me, studying my fingers as they held the cigarette and my face as I took another greedy drag. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the smoke.

All too soon he took it away and I silently mourned the taste, but I couldn't protest either. Maybe he would never give me the chance again.

“Sit down at the piano and play.” I crossed my arms, having thought we had long since left this game behind. “I hate to repeat myself, so do as I say.”

Clenching my hands into fists, I followed his cruel order.

The dusty piano awaited me like an enemy, taunting me like a bully. With trembling hands, I tuned the first notes and, as predicted, failed miserably. I tried again, and again, and again.

My anger boiled over and I banged my fist against the once white keys, eliciting a deep tone from the instrument. My professor looked at me with amusement.

“That sounded horrible,” he admitted, and I could see the challenge in his eyes.

“Oh, yeah? Well, do it better,” I returned in defiance.

Unexpectedly, he rose from his leather chair and approached me with confident steps. The piano bench barely had space for the two of us, causing me to almost fall to the side as he sat down next to me. His leg rubbed against mine and I felt the warmth radiating from his body. Mr. Preston towered over me a great deal, and I tilted my head back to look up at him.

He touched the keys, and my mouth fell open. His fingers brought out the sweetest of melodies, playing a song that was heartbreakingly beautiful. It sounded almost not of this time, and I envied him for the ability to play so exquisitely. A true talent, a musical genius, was sitting next to me and I was near to tears.

“How?” That was all I could get out.

“I learned from the best. Play with me,” he whispered.

He removed one hand, and I replaced it as if hypnotized by the sound, having memorized the notes and the flow as if I had played this song all my life, as if my soul knew it by heart.

At first, my fingers tentatively glided over the left half of the piano. Then I became more confident, more ambitious, lost in the music. All too soon I was torn from my dream when one of my fingers twitched and I ruined the song and with it, the moment.

“I’m sorry I—“ Before I could say anything else, he silenced me.

“Don’t apologize, not for this.”

My protest dissolved into thin air as his index finger grazed mine, sending a thousand tiny lightning bolts sweeping through my veins.

We remained in this position but did not speak a word. I was confused, and, in a certain way, intrigued by him. Only he knew what was behind his facade.

My lips opened slightly, and I felt his breath on my forehead.

“Keep playing,” he finally said in his raspy voice and rose. The surrounding air suddenly felt far too cold.

Some time passed, during which I gave us both an earache and my frustration boiled over.

Finally, he spoke the long-awaited words and dismissed me.

“Isn’t your friend picking you up today?” my professor asked dryly, but I could tell there was more to it, so I decided to push it further.

“No, I’ll meet him at my place later.” He snorted.

“I don’t think so,” he countered with disdain, as if he had control over my free time.

“And why not?” I crossed my arms.

“Because I don’t want to.” He copied my posture.

“Then what *do* you want, professor?” I gave him a crooked smile and watched his mask crumble for a moment before he fixed it.

“That you wouldn’t talk so much.” With that, he let me go and returned his attention to his paperwork, but at the last second, I saw him try to suppress a smile.



THE LIBRARY at this boarding school didn’t have a coherent system. Books weren’t sorted alphabetically, nor by genre or publisher.

I had been spinning in circles for several minutes, still not finding the right book for tomorrow’s class. We had a few chapters to read, and I didn’t feel like doing detention besides my tutoring sessions.

The last students were still lingering in corners, whispering things to each other, or typing on their tablets. I wondered how anyone could just read with this crappy light.

After another round in which I didn’t find what I was looking for, I discovered the book a few rows up, out of my reach. Annoyed, I pulled my skirt down a little and placed my feet on the two lowest shelves to pull myself up.

Just as my fingers were about to touch the red leather cover, someone grabbed me from behind and a shrill sound escaped me. Before my eyes realized who was standing behind

me, my nose caught the familiar scent—Mr. Preston. He pushed me up, hands tight around my waist.

I grabbed the book and exhaled in relief when he put me back down. My back was pressed against his firm chest, and I felt his heart hammering against my blouse.

“Thank you,” I whispered without moving. He leaned forward so that his chin rested on my shoulder.

“Watch out next time, or you’ll break your neck.”

Only a quiet *Mhm* came over my lips.

Finally, I turned around. His face was much too close to mine, and he made no move to step back, so I did instead and bumped my back against the shelf. Mr. Preston came closer so that barely a few handbreadths separated us.

A golden glow wrapped around his black hair, his shirt more casual than in class. The dim light from above cast a shadow on his face, hiding it from the world so that only I could see it.

My eyes met his, but I couldn’t interpret his gaze, or rather didn’t *want* to.

“Don’t look at me like that, Avery,” he whispered, his hot breath tickling my ear.

“What do you mean?” There was a kind of provocation in my tone that I didn’t know existed.

“You know exactly what I mean. Stop it.”

I was about to protest when he turned his back on me and walked over to one of the tables, the wood already aging and darker in some places.

My gaze fell on Penelope Arden, who sat down next to him and seductively threw back her hair to expose her bare shoulders. So that’s why he was here. He had a date with her.

Like a weirdo, I watched them for a few more moments until I finally stepped away, showed the librarian my card and left this place.



LEILAH HUMMED along to some tune from her tablet, and I tried to focus on the last few pages of the book.

We were both in our pajamas, not planning on going anywhere, not when there was still a murderer on the loose.

“What do you want to wear for Halloween?” she asked me out of nowhere. I thought about it, but couldn’t decide on an outfit.”

“I don’t know yet. I was hoping you could lend me something nice.” She nodded cheerfully. “Do they allow alcohol?” A little distraction would do us all good.

“No, and it’s better that way, believe me. Things can get pretty...out of hand when you let criminal kids get drunk.” That sounded pretty reasonable. I certainly didn’t want to clash with anyone and risk my place here.

“Besides, the entire faculty will be present, so it’s going to be very civil.” She winked at me, and I couldn’t help but grin.

“Penelope Arden, too? She doesn’t seem like the kind of person who likes to go to parties.”

“If Mr. Preston goes, she goes,” she stated with a shrug.

I became suspicious.

“Why?” My question should sound as casual as possible. Truthfully, I didn’t even care.

“Oh, that’s an interesting story. They were engaged for a while until he broke up with her.” Engaged? I couldn’t believe my ears.

“But he’s just...” To be honest, I didn’t even know exactly how old he was.

“27,” Leilah added, “It’s a family thing with them. Their fathers are very...conservative, to put it nicely. Anyway, she’s still not over him.”

Okay, at that age you weren't too young to get married, but somehow, I couldn't picture Mr. Preston as a loving husband.

Poor Penelope, though. Then again, I didn't care much about her either, just like she didn't care about me.

Leilah's tablet vibrated, and she read the message with a certain fire in her eyes.

"I have to go now. Besides, I'm hungry." I looked at her, perplexed.

"First, we just ate, and second, are you completely stupid? There could be a killer outside." She rolled her eyes playfully.

"I'll be just fine, I promise. And I'm not talking about food."

With an air kiss and a suspicious smile, she disappeared through the door before I could convince her to stay.

I dropped back and stared at the ceiling, the wood dark and polished. Mr. Preston had not texted me again that evening, and I wondered if it had something to do with our encounter at the library.

Mr. Preston had not come to our tutoring session yesterday. I had heard that he was investigating the dead girl's case with the principal. At least they were doing something.

The more time passed, the more anxious I became. The hallways seemed more sinister, the woods more menacing with the constant fog that bathed the earth in milky white. Someone here had gotten their hands dirty. Maybe my classmate in math? Or the girl who always talked to herself?

Everyone was a suspect. For many, even me. Only Leilah, Caleb, and Noah had never looked at me with mistrust and never talked about that night again—at least not in front of me.

Fortunately, we always finished early on Fridays, which meant that I could catch up on some homework. How I would have loved to just sit in a cute little coffee shop and read, drinking cocoa with marshmallows, and looking theatrically out the window.

But revenge tasted sweeter than any chocolate in the world. And so did justice.

“Let's go, I have a surprise for us,” Leilah urged me with a mischievous smile on her face.

The boys followed us to our room, which was far too messy to welcome guests.

I felt more comfortable with them than I should have, considering what had happened the last time I had made

friends. Yeah, I had woken up in the hospital with both arms broken. That had not been a lovely bonding experience.

It was much simpler with the trio. I didn't have to pretend or mince my words. It felt refreshing—it was new and scary as hell.

Caleb threw himself on Leila's bed, causing the old springs to squeak. Noah took a seat at our desk and typed on his tablet. I kicked off my shoes and sat on the edge of the bed.

I watched my roommate pull three large, dark glass bottles from under her bed and present them to us like a prize.

"Where did you get them?" Noah marveled, his mouth open. Caleb, on the other hand, looked at her with concern.

"I have my sources," she retorted.

"We'd better not." Caleb's voice dropped an octave, sounding more determined. First, he looked at me, then at the black-haired woman beside him. She just waved it off.

"Oh, don't be a buzzkill. She'll be fine." Confused, I followed their conversation. Was it really all about alcohol?

Eventually, he fell silent and let her win.

With a pop, the cork disappeared somewhere on the floor. My roommate took the first sip, at which she wrinkled her nose.

"Not the best wine I've had, but sweet." I took the bottle somewhat hesitantly, remembering the times when I had drunk to forget rather than to enjoy.

Noah's gaze followed my movements, always a smile on his face—I admired him for that positivity.

I took the first sip and had to agree with the hyper girl in front of me. It tasted horrible.

This puddle water was a silent harbinger that I was going to puke today.

No, not with me. Noah reached out, and I gladly passed him the bottle.

“Let’s take a picture,” Leilah said as she clapped her hands like an excited kid. “We should hold on to this moment.”

She shoed the boys onto my bed and squeezed in between us. Noah offered to take it, since his hands were by far bigger than my roommate’s and so he could hold the tablet better.

“Now put on your foxy smile, Avery,” she quipped. I suppressed an eye roll and did as she told me. Even Caleb had dropped his brooding expression for a change and seemed almost friendly.

“Done,” the photographer said, showing us the picture.

“Perfect.” Leilah handed me the tablet and I couldn’t help but grin. We looked like *real* friends.



AFTER SOME HEATED discussions and three bottles of the most disgusting wine of my life, I realized how the alcohol had gone to my head. The room was slightly spinning, and the faces of our guests were a bit blurry. Or maybe I just needed glasses.

Noah was the first to leave. Surprisingly, he didn’t seem the least bit drunk. Even Caleb and Leilah appeared more sober than ever. I probably just had a low tolerance or hadn’t eaten enough.

“We have to go. Can I leave you alone?” she asked, looking me up and down. I nodded.

“You guys go ahead. I’ll be fine.” Caleb seemed skeptical, but I convinced him I would go to sleep soon, anyway. Eventually, they disappeared silently through the door.

I had traded my uncomfortable school uniform for my fluffy pink pajamas. The pants and the long-sleeved top had apples on them, which looked really cute.

Some time passed when I just lay there, humming an old tune, a tune from my childhood, from a happier time.

All too quickly, my thoughts drifted to Mr. Preston - Alexander - and his insufferable yet fascinating nature. I wondered if he had canceled the session because of me. No, I couldn't imagine that.

Either I was an idiot or very bored, but in a weak moment I picked up my tablet and opened our conversation.

AVERY JAMES:

I'm bored. What about you?

I waited nervously for his reply. Maybe he was already asleep.

UNKNOWN:

Why should that be my problem?

Asshole.

AVERY JAMES:

Have people ever told you what a sunshine you are?

UNKNOWN:

Have people ever told you that you talk too much?

I decided to mess a little with his head. He was somehow funny when he was angry. Especially when *I* made him angry.

AVERY JAMES:

No, you would be my first.

**the first*

UNKNOWN:

Have you thought about me being your first, Avery?

My mouth fell open. That was an answer I had not seen coming. Alright, you asked for it...

AVERY JAMES:

Let's play a game.

UNKNOWN:

I don't like games.

AVERY JAMES:

*You'll love this one. I hide and you seek. If you find me, which
I doubt, you can do whatever you want.*

It was an offer he couldn't refuse. I only hoped that his common sense would not get in the way.

UNKNOWN:

I give you 10 minutes. You'll regret this.

Jackpot.

AVERY JAMES:

I know.

A certain thrill went through my body. It was as if all my senses were alerted at once. The kick almost made me sober up again, and I put on my shoes and coat.

Of course, he would look for me in the hallway near my room, so that wasn't an option. I was a very competitive person, and I didn't want to give him that victory.

My gaze wandered to the window. It wasn't like I could just walk out the front door, so I had to get creative.

We lived just above the ground floor, and the ceilings were very low, so the jump wasn't too dangerous. Also, the outside facade was so uneven that my feet could find a foothold.

Fuck it, I'd get back in somehow.

I opened the window and climbed over the sill, my tablet well hidden in the pocket of my coat. Leilah would bail me out if necessary.

Okay, it looked a lot higher at night, but I didn't let that scare me. Focused, I placed my feet in two notches, clawing at two other rocks, and climbed down that way. The grass would cushion my fall, I thought.

Finally, I had solid ground under my feet, the air icy around my face overheated with anticipation.

The night had a special scent I couldn't describe, and yet I was in love with it.

I pulled out my tablet and checked the time. Two minutes left, so I ran.

I didn't know exactly where to go. Maybe straight ahead? Eventually, I would arrive somewhere.

Only the moon was a silent witness to my idiotic and breakneck plan. If a killer would cross my path, my death would be solely my fault. But I could not help it. For a long time, I had not felt so alive.

My legs burned from sprinting and my lungs threatened to collapse.

The woods opened up before me, screaming to stay away, to go home and never come near them again.

I blanked out the imaginary warning and before I knew it, I was surrounded by various trees whose species I did not recognize. The mossy smell hit my nose, and I greedily sucked it in.

I did not move far, only a few steps—more was also not necessary. Never in my life would he find me here.

Out of breath, I dropped down on one of the tree stumps and pressed the coat tighter to my body. Maybe I should have taken a scarf with me. Anyway, I had already won. It was worth it.

A branch close to me cracked, and I jumped up. Just an animal, I reassured myself, no need to panic. But the cracking became louder and louder, as if someone was running towards me. My heart was hammering.

What the hell?

I rose and prepared to leave, my limbs already frozen.

Just as I was about to take the first step, someone made me trip and pinned me to the ground. A scream escaped my throat.

I tried to push the attacker off me, but he held my arms above my head.

Only when I noticed the familiar yet somewhat blurry face did I calm down again, but the adrenaline didn't stop pumping

through my body.

“So, you like it in the mud, little brat,” my professor whispered in my ear. That was *impossible*. How could he find me so quickly?

His thigh pressed between my legs, igniting a warmth inside of me that was unlike anything I knew.

He shifted his body weight so that it created a sweet yet forbidden friction. “Tell me, what do you want me to do to you?” I swallowed. His chest was so close to mine that I could feel his heart beating way too fast.

“What do *you* want to do to me?” I felt him smile against my throat.

“The list is long, and the night is too short for what I have in mind.”

My body pressed against his, seeking his warmth, his touch. Just then, I felt how hard he was.

He saw this as an invitation to free my wrists just so his hand could find its way under my coat, then under my shirt.

I shuddered. His fingers were ice cold, but my skin burned under his touch.

“Do you want me to touch you?” he asked in a raspy voice. I nodded, but that was not good enough for him. “Use your words.” I felt the blush creeping up my face.

Although he certainly couldn’t see it, I still felt embarrassed. I had never spoken such things.

“Please, professor, touch me.” His hand wandered up, fingers almost brushing over my breast.

I needed him like I had never needed a man before.

“Can I touch *you*?” My words were barely a whisper, and I wasn’t even sure he had heard them.

“You want to touch me?” he asked smugly. I nodded, his face far too close to mine and yet not close enough. “Then touch me, Avery.”

My hand wandered from his cheek, over his jaw, to his throat. I enjoyed every inch.

Greedily, I stroked his chest. Even through the hoodie, I could feel how well defined it was. I made my way down from his waist, squeezing my hand in the small space between our bodies. His breathing quickened.

I finally found what I was looking for, as my fingers grazed his length through the soft sweatpants, eliciting a breathy moan from him.

I felt in power, I felt strong and sensual. This moment was a turning point—that was for sure.

Before I could realize it, he had cupped one of my breasts and was playing with my nipple. I couldn't stifle a moan, my mouth inches from his. We were tasting practically the same air.

“Such soft skin,” he murmured, more to himself.

Mr. Preston shifted his weight one last time, causing that longing between my legs. Did he even know how fucking wet that made me? Surely, he did.

Before I could indulge in the sensation any longer, he moved away from me and rose elegantly to his feet. My skin cried out for his touch, my mind for his scent. Why had he stopped?

“My price is seeing you being so turned on and on edge, and yet not giving you what you're practically begging me for.”

My mouth dropped open. I felt betrayed. This asshole had only toyed with me. Yet the bulge in his pants told me that his little game had gotten more under his skin than he had expected.

“That was the last time,” I hissed, anger spreading through my body making my blood boil.

“Good. Now get up and get back to your room before you get expelled.”

Gone was the fire in his eyes, the tenderness in his touch. All that remained was the insufferable facade that I hated so much.

With stiff legs, I stood up and patted the leaves and dirt off my coat. Only the crackling of branches broke the silence between us. The whole time he looked at me with that arrogant expression and in this moment, I would have liked to claw his eyes out.

Without dignifying my professor with another look, I walked past him, bumping my shoulder against his arm.

You'll be sorry. Let the games begin.

Yesterday I had woken up with a throbbing headache. All too quickly, the images of my encounter with Mr. Preston played out in my mind's eye.

Damn. Why had I made myself so vulnerable? He had taken a joke out of my bout of weakness, and for that, he had to pay. Today would be the first day. He would be sorry that he had messed with me. I was not a good enemy to have.

I put on my uniform and unbuttoned my blouse further than I was used to. My makeup was a little heavier today, and I tamed my curls more thoroughly so that they flowed down my back in wild waves. I also stole two sprays of Leilah's perfume, which smelled divinely good of flowers, spices and something feminine.

With a proud stride, I walked down the hallways to the large common room, where several students had already gathered and were playing card games or laughing loudly in groups at some dirty joke. Filled with anticipation, I kept a lookout for the trio, who had become a bit too dear to me in the meantime.

My roommate beckoned me to join her, and I passed quite a few students I'm sure I'd seen at some point in class. By now, my name was no longer trending on their social platform and people had already found other gossip to talk about.

It was rather sad how quickly people forgot about the death of a classmate. I, for one, dreamed of her almost every

night. And then these strange snippets that I could barely remember the next morning.... I shook my head. Not now.

“What’s that perfume?” Noah asked as he stepped closer to my throat and sniffed.

“Don’t you like it?” I put on a pout, and he playfully wrinkled his nose.

“It’s mine, you prick. And it smells amazing. Don’t listen to him,” Leilah cut in.

“I like your natural scent better,” he admitted with a wink and Caleb looked at him admonishingly.

“What’s the occasion?” the handsome guy with the light hair asked as he eyed me. I shrugged.

“Isn’t a girl allowed to make herself look pretty anymore?” Leilah looked back and forth between the two of them, annoyed, and I stayed out of the debate.

The boys led us to a pool table where balls and cues were already waiting.

“Fancy a round?” Caleb asked. I hadn’t played in a long time, but it was like riding a bike, wasn’t it?

Noah and I teamed up, and I already felt sorry for him because we were sure to lose.

“You owe me a drink if I have to give those two the win.”

I giggled, honestly amused by his lighthearted nature.

The flames in the fireplace cast a reddish shimmer on his skin, making it glow. He really wasn’t bad to look at, especially with his shirt stretched around his biceps like that.

Noah flicked me in the face, snapping me out of my thoughts. “Done staring?” I rolled my eyes and focused on the game.



TWO LOSSES LATER, I was already so pissed off that I threw in the towel. Either the others were far too good or I was lousy. Maybe both.

Leilah had taken pictures of us and our angry faces every now and then, and knowing her, she had posted them already. I looked at my tablet and scrolled through my feed.

Her evidence of our failure popped up, and I had to smile at some of them. One in particular caught my eye: I was standing with the cue in my hand, looking teasingly over my shoulder at Noah, who gave me a charming smile and tugged playfully on one of my curls.

It looked cute, so I downloaded the picture and posted it along with other funny ones on my profile. At least it didn't seem so empty now.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a black-haired man walking hurriedly down the hallway, his hair wild and unkempt. Halfway down, his face barely turned in my direction, and I knew he saw me. I held his stare, didn't buckle.

I could have imagined it, but I was almost sure he clenched his jaw dangerously hard before turning his face away.



WE SPENT another solid two hours in the common room when suddenly my tablet vibrated. I stared at the brief message from *Unknown* and narrowed my eyes.

UNKNOWN:

What the fuck do you think you're doing?

What was his damn problem? I was itching to send him a jerky comment but changed my mind at the last moment.

No, he didn't deserve my attention—not yet. It would infuriate him much more if I ignored his message, so I tucked the tablet back between the waistband of my skirt and my belly.

“Did something happen?” Leilah asked worriedly, but I assured her that everything was fine.

“Let's go, I'm starving,” Noah called out, and I had to agree with him. My stomach was growling since I hadn't eaten all day and the sun was already setting. “I have to see the nurse first, though.” I looked at him, confused. He didn't seem sick at all.

“Are you getting the flu?” I asked, but he shook his head.

“It's nothing. I just need to pick something up.” I didn't dwell on it. Obviously, he didn't want to talk about it, and I gave him his space.

We all walked together to the nurse, who had also treated me back then. In front of us, Caleb put his arm around Leilah's shoulders, and she nuzzled against him.

A small smile spread across my face when I saw them together like that. Maybe now they dared to love each other out loud. I wished this happiness for her.

I remembered a time when I was also in love. It was long ago, and the story did not end well, to say the least. I was over him now, but emptiness still lingered in my chest.

The door to the nurse's office opened before we could even knock. The three of them entered, leaving me in the hallway. I should just wait here, they had said. Alright. Still, it seemed strange.

My tablet vibrated again, and I knew who it was before I even read the message. Mr. Preston had sent me the picture of Noah and me and written a rather harsh message underneath.

UNKNOWN:

-picture-

Are you serious?

Again, I ignored his message and leaned against the cold stone wall. It was easy to give him the cold shoulder, especially when I knew it would drive him crazy. I wondered how far I could push it with him, how long he would keep playing along. Maybe I was also tripping headfirst into something there was no turning back from.

I startled when the door was yanked open and Leilah, Caleb, and Noah stepped out. The three of them seemed more jittery than they had all day. Who knows what drugs they were getting in there. The more important question, however, was what I had to do to get the same.

“And now we’re going to eat,” the black-haired girl said, linking arms with me as we made our way back.



I was painting my fingernails while Leilah scrolled on her tablet. Sometimes she snorted or rolled her eyes and I had to smile every time.

“Are you and Caleb a thing?” I asked shamelessly. My curiosity had gotten the better of me and I hadn’t had girl talk like in forever.

“Our...relationship is very complicated. It’s hard to explain.” She looked conflicted, was probably weighing how much she could tell me.

I didn’t blame her. She barely knew me, and I didn’t expect her to blurt out her entire love life. “Our bond is not accepted by my parents and by my brother even less.”

“If that’s what’s holding you back, then I misjudged you to be stronger than you really are,” I replied bitterly, unable to stop the sadness that crept into my heart at her words.

Leilah gave me a sorrowful smile. “Don’t mistake my appearance for how I feel inside. My world is so much different from yours.”

“We breathe the same air and cry the same tears. Our world is certainly not as different as you may think.” Her eyes told me that she disagreed, even though she didn’t want to.

We spent some time in silence, just enjoying each other’s company.

She lay on her back, hands behind her head. “Thank you.” That statement had caught me off guard.

“For what?” I rested my cheek on my knee and studied her.

“For making me feel human.”

Thank you for making me feel like I have a friend.



Leilah was sound asleep. Only her soft snoring filled the silence in the room. I still had my bedside lamp on and was looking at the latest posts on our social platform when something crossed my mind.

I tiptoed to our closet and pulled out a flimsy silk top, took off my pajama shirt, and put on the black lacy thing. It didn’t hurt to send Mr. Preston a picture after ignoring his messages all day.

Without making too much noise, I stepped back into the much too hard bed and posed in the dim light until I was satisfied with a picture.

Fortunately, I had forgotten to take off my makeup, otherwise the dark circles under my eyes would have made me look like a sleep-deprived panda.

AVERY JAMES:

-picture-

Good night.

I did not have to wait long for an answer. Soon my tablet vibrated, and I read his message.

UNKNOWN:

Why do you fucking do that?

To mess with your head, asshole. Why else would I send you a provocative picture in the middle of the night?

AVERY JAMES:

What do you mean?

UNKNOWN:

You know exactly what I mean.

Stop looking like that.

Someone here has anger issues, I thought, that's hot. Speaking of hot...

AVERY JAMES:

*But yesterday you pretty much liked my look.
You know, back when you were so hard only by having me
under you.*

UNKNOWN:

If I were a weaker man, I would have fucked you then and there.

But your edginess was satisfaction enough.

Reading these words, the warm feeling in my lower belly spread again. Inevitably, I remembered how he had felt on top of me, how hard he had breathed against my throat. No, Avery, focus.

AVERY JAMES:

Who said I would have let you?

UNKNOWN:

You pressed yourself so hard against my dick, it was the most obvious invitation.

Without wanting to, I squeezed my thighs together, thinking about the bittersweet friction he had given me. That feeling still lingered like an echo in my mind. But I couldn't give in, couldn't let him see that Friday night had affected me more than I preferred.

AVERY JAMES:

That is not true.

UNKNOWN:

It sure is.

I bet you're drenched just by the thought of us yesterday.

Oh, if he only knew how wet I was because of him right now.
Why shouldn't I take it one step further?

AVERY JAMES:

Come and feel.

UNKNOWN:

Is this an invitation?

He wouldn't come anyway, I was sure of that. Mr. Preston had made it all too clear that he was just messing with me.

AVERY JAMES:

Yes, professor.

UNKNOWN:

10 minutes, then come outside.

Was he being serious, or was this another test of how far I would go? I wouldn't fall for it again.

AVERY JAMES:

And if I don't want to?

UNKNOWN:

*Then I'll come in and give your roommate a show she surely
won't forget.*

Tell me, is this your thing?

My throat felt suddenly way too dry. I slowly got the feeling that he really expected me to come outside in a few moments. I could also very well believe he was psycho enough to just show up here.

Before I had to face him, I wanted to put on another pair of shorts. If I was going to tempt him, then at least with a decent outfit. Matching my top, I slipped into the black silk bottoms that came with the set.

Pulse racing, I looked in the mirror one last time before closing the door as quietly as possible behind me and exhaling deeply. Leilah would certainly not wake up, even if the entire building was shaking.

I wasn't sure where to go, so I just turned left and head straight out, always following the candleholders on the wall.

The glow of the flames barely lit the way and cast an uncanny shadow on the paintings. With each flicker, it looked as if the people in them were moving.

My plush slippers were so silent that I couldn't be found unless someone was specifically looking for me.

I wondered if he had already left or if he was just lying in his bed making fun of my naivety. The cool air gave me

goosebumps, and I rubbed my bare upper arms to create at least a little warmth.

Before I turned again, I felt a tingling sensation at the back of my neck. Maybe it was just the adrenaline or the uncertainty of what would happen next. I didn't hear any footsteps, so I must have imagined the feeling of being watched. And there... A draft behind me.

I turned around, but no one was there. Pull yourself together, I thought, and kept walking. One particular painting on my left caught my eye. The frame stood out clearly against the black tapestry and looked quite aged.

A beautiful woman with black curls stared back at me, her dress as if from another time. The silk and chiffon hugged her curves like ice blue water and brought out her eyes. She didn't smile. No, she looked down on you like the queen she probably had been.

A rough hand closed around my throat and pulled me back so that I slammed against a hard body.

“Hello, little brat.”

His other hand snaked around my belly and pressed me closer to him.

“I had almost thought you got scared,” I said in a taunting way.

“Oh, have you really?” His breath was warm against my ear as his fingers dug harder into my skin, making me whimper.

Mr. Preston sucked in the smell of my hair, and I felt his lips brushing the back of my head. “Why did you let him touch your hair?”

It took me a moment to understand what he was talking about—the photo with me and Noah.

“Because it was sweet.” I almost didn’t hear my own words, and a heart was pounding so wildly I was afraid it would stop.

He snorted. The other hand was still around my throat, grip just tight enough so that fear was a constant companion but not so tight to cut off my air supply.

“You don’t like sweet, Avery,” my professor said in a low voice.

His fingers moved under my top, caressing my skin and leaving flames of desire.

“And what do I like?” I asked as I leaned my head against his chest.

“You like to be praised like a deity, you like to have your body devoured, kissed inch by inch, fucked exactly like you deserve it all night long.” My mouth fell open. I could not believe my ears.

“Noah would never speak to me like that.” His grip on my throat tightened as his hand passed my belly button and traveled downward.

“I bet he wouldn’t. I also bet you like the way I talk.”

I felt his smile on my skin as he leaned down and brushed his lips along my neck.

My nipples hardened, begged to be touched.

“I like how it sounds when you say my name.” He paused briefly before his fingers reached the waistband of my panties.

I arched my back, ass touching his hard length, and he pressed himself tighter against me.

“Next time he should take his dirty fingers off of you or he won’t have any by the time you’ll see him again.”

Was he still that pissed because of a stupid photo?

“Noah doesn’t do anything.” I smiled and added, “Yet.”

Faster than was possible, he spun me around and pinned me against the wall. His fingers were clawed in my hair, the other hand rested above my head.

The dim candlelight cast a shadow on one side of his face, making his sharp features look even more striking.

“And he won’t,” he growled. “Ever. I’ll make sure of that.”

I tilted my head back so that I could look him in the eyes. The adrenaline was still flowing through my hyper-sensitive body, making me have all these forbidden thoughts about us.

“So nobody can touch me just because you wish so?” I asked, irritated.

“Exactly, little brat.” An arrogant smile spread across his face, exposing his perfect teeth.

“You’re not my guardian and this is not a prison,” I retorted, his grip on my hair tightening, almost hurting.

“Oh but how bad you’d like me to lock you up and fuck you all night long.”

I pressed my thighs together, thinking about his thrusts, his taste. “What are you thinking about, *Avery*?”

“Nothing.” I said and tried to take my eyes off him, but his gaze burned with such intensity I’ve never seen before.

My professor’s hand found its way under my top, wandering from my waist further and further up until he cupped my breast, drawing small circles on my nipple with his thumb. A husky moan came from my lips, spurring him on to add more pressure.

“What are we doing here?” At such moments, I forgot who was standing in front of me, and I was sure he felt the same way. But why did it feel so damn good?

“I don’t know,” was his only response.

Before I could say anything else, he lifted me up, and I hooked my legs around his waist. We were barely separated by the fabric of his sweatpants and the thin layer of silk on me.

Mr. Preston cupped my ass, his fingers on my bare skin since my shorts slipped out.

I felt his boner between my legs and pressed myself against him. A deep growl escaped him as he lifted me up and down, rubbing me against him.

“This is so wrong,” was the only thing I could get out, as this sweet friction almost sent me over the edge.

“So wrong,” he breathed against my ear.

But he did not stop, and I did not protest. We both embraced the danger of this moment, a danger that might send me to prison.

Again, he dug into my hair and pulled my head to the side, exposing my throat. A slight burning sensation spread across

my scalp, but I enjoyed the pain—it made me realize that it wasn't just a fever dream.

His lips found my skin, the warmth of his tongue caressing the sensitive spot between my ear and my jaw, which made me moan in pleasure.

He teased me with his teeth, scraping along the spot where my pulse was. It almost tickled. I wondered what he would taste like, how his tongue would feel on mine.

Determined, I took his chin between my thumb and finger, wanting to guide his mouth to mine, but he pulled his head back at the last second. Was this another one of his little games?

“What?” I asked, eyes narrowed.

“For this,” he pressed me against him one last time, his dick even harder than before, “I’m just a man.” I hummed in desire at that feeling of him between my legs.

“But for this,” he brushed his thumb over my lower lip, “for this, I’m still your professor.”

Disappointment spread through me. No matter how true his words were, they were like a slap in the face. In a lucid moment, however, I recollected myself and pulled away from him. Professor, Avery, he was your *professor*.

“This was a mistake.” I freed his hips from my trembling legs, and he let me down, his face returning to the mask of ice he almost never took off.

“It was.” He stepped back a pace, regarding me from head to toe. “Go back to your room.”

With those words, he turned his back on me and disappeared, engulfed by darkness. It was almost as if he had never been there. Even his bewitching scent no longer lingered in the air, as it usually did.

It was in this service that they first spoke about Olivia and finally showed her the respect she deserved.

It pissed me off how everyone here was such hypocrites. Especially Ms. Arden with her fake smile. As if she cared about the dead girl.

“Get a grip,” Leilah hissed, afraid of drawing the principal’s ire. “Even I can see your invisible daggers.”

“They won’t be so invisible anymore if I have to listen to this shit any longer.”

She just rolled her eyes and didn’t respond to my comment.

“Be assured that we are doing everything in our power to find the person who committed such a monstrous crime. We will not stop until justice is done to Olivia,” Ms. Arden said sternly. I snorted. “Do you have any questions?” Before Leilah could stop me, my hand was up. Some heads turned in my direction, others whispered.

“Go on.” The blonde made a hand gesture in my direction.

“Since you are doing everything in your power, I’m sure you already have some clues. Who is the murderer, Ms. Arden?”

She cleared her throat, maintaining her facade of elegance. Only her eyes bore witness I had irritated her.

“Thanks to the help of our dedicated police officers, we were able to reconstruct the evening and secure some traces at the scene. Of course, we can’t reveal any details because that would compromise the investigation.”

She looked me in the eyes. “But I am sure that there are a few in this academy who would be capable of murder.”

“So dumb and dumber suspect someone from school?” I probed.

Leilah tugged at my skirt for me to sit back down, but I paid her no attention.

“Only a fool would not suspect you.” With these words, she turned away. Church service was over.

“That was uncool,” I heard a certain black-haired girl mumble from my left.

“It was fun,” I countered. To my right, Noah chuckled.

At least someone had enjoyed the show.



I HAD JUST SAID goodbye to the trio and was on my way to the tutoring session when I heard two familiar voices. A turn away, the women were whispering, their words barely audible.

I didn’t see their faces, but knew for sure that it was Penelope Arden and the principal. I tiptoed to the corner and pressed myself against the wall. The hallway was barely lit, which veiled me from the women who had no idea I was overhearing their conversation.

“You can’t protect him forever. Your parents will know,” the principal said firmly.

“He lost control. It happened to all of us at one point,” Ms. Arden replied.

“It’s just that there’s more at stake for him than for any of us. You wanted to be by his side. You said he’d control himself

when you're with him. The girl's death is on your head, Penelope." One of them shifted.

"Are you going to tell my father?" she asked, voice full of fear. There was a long pause.

"Of course not." The principal snorted. "But it's only a matter of time before he finds out. Then, even your love won't save him."

My jaw dropped. Protect whom? Why should any of us have *lost control* before? And who did they mean by *him*?

Before I could hear any more, the women went off in different directions, leaving me with dozens of questions.

The two of them knew more than they were admitting, knew Olivia's killer and were protecting him. But who did they care enough about not to go to the police? The cold realization came sooner than expected—Mr. Preston, former fiancé of Penelope and the principal's nephew.

Was my professor a cold-blooded murderer? Had he had the dead girl on his conscience?

He had touched me with the same hands with which he maybe had killed Olivia. He had played with me, I had almost given myself to him—a psychopath.

But what reason should Mr. Preston have had? Had he *lost control* and if so, over what? I was sure that I would not find an answer to even one of these questions.

What I did realize, however, was that the longer I was around him, the more I was in danger. If my professor was killing students because he had *lost control*, then he was a ticking time bomb and I would be standing next to him when the countdown was over, would be swallowed by eternal darkness until there was nothing left of me.



WITH A QUEASY FEELING and a thousand emotions running through my head, I climbed the last few stairs, turned, and was

soon standing in front of Mr. Preston's office door.

My heart was beating like crazy, and I was about to turn around and call in sick. No, that would be far too obvious, especially since I had been seen safe and sound in class today.

A gentle breeze stirred up some of my curls, as if urging me to finally enter. You can do it, I thought, just don't act weird.

I knocked and entered the room, my professor lost in the papers on his desk. He didn't even look up at me as I sat down in the comfortable leather chair and waited for a reaction from him.

"Do your homework." I crossed my legs.

I had watched him many times, and yet it seemed as if a new, more dangerous man was sitting in front me. The coldness around him seemed more prominent at that moment, his aura even more sinister.

"Already did." Maybe Mr. Preston would just let me go.

He looked up at me for the first time, his expression the spitting image of indifference. It was as if he didn't know me at all. Considering last night, it almost seemed as if he was giving me the cold shoulder. But why? Because I had said that it was a mistake? Yes, it was, no matter how good it had felt, how perfectly his body had clung to mine.

We had crossed a line, yielded to a fire that eventually would have burned us, consumed us.

"Show me," he demanded, and I followed his order.

Annoyed, he pulled the paper out of my hand and read the essay. I had spent my free time between class and the tutoring session trying to finish quickly so that I would have nothing to do in the evening.

I couldn't believe my eyes when he tore my homework in two and threw the pages into the garbage.

"Do it again." At first, I was shocked, but all too quickly, anger replaced my bewilderment.

“Are you completely out of your mind?” I asked, my blood about to boil.

“Sometimes, not today. Now do what I told you.” I stared at him with clenched fists, holding his arrogant stare and wishing I could have clawed his eyes out.

“Is that how you talk to women in bed? Are you such a smug asshole there, too?” I retorted, cursing myself at the same moment for my stupid words.

I had not only insulted my professor, no, I had also insulted a potential murderer. My brain just hadn't quite grasped who was standing in front of me, what danger lurked in this room.

My instinct for self-preservation had always been miserable. I attracted threats almost magically, and yet I bit my cheek and was on the verge of apologizing to this waste of sperm.

“Exactly. And yet they keep coming back, begging for more.” A devilish smirk crossed his face, the only emotion he had shown today. “If I tell them to sit, they sit. If I tell them to undress, they undress. And if I tell them to fuck me until I forget my name, they do. Gladly.”

“And then you pay them and go your separate ways,” I said with a raised eyebrow and saw him trying to suppress a laugh.

“I will not repeat myself. Essay. Now.”

Fuck you.



TENSELY, I handed Mr. Preston my new, polished essay, and I had to admit grudgingly that it sounded a lot better than the first one.

“Not so miserable anymore,” was the only thing he said. “You certainly know what’s going to happen next.” My throat tightened as I thought of his torture.

“Why are you doing this?” I blurted.

He sat back and crossed his arms. “What do you mean?” I leaned forward, piercing him with my gaze.

“Don’t act dumber than you are. It doesn’t suit you.” Amused, he shook his head.

“I want to pull you out of your hole of self-pity, show you that you can still play. Or could, if you’d finally put some effort into it.” His words had taken me by surprise.

“And if there’s nothing there I should put in the effort for?” My professor shook his head.

“Everyone has desires, goals,” he said dryly.

“My desires and goals died in that ditch. But I’ll survive, I’ll always do.”

“But your soul won’t.” For a while we just looked at each other, his blue eyes, a sea of secrets, fixed on me. Could this man, a man who talked about the withering of an artist’s soul, really be a murderer?

Without responding to his comment, I straightened up and went to the piano. “Play as if I’m not here,” he whispered, his voice a little more compassionate. “Play for greatness, Avery.”

But my goal was not greatness, my goal was to create a melody without my fingers twitching uncontrollably and butchering it.

As expected, I played like a beginner, but instead of losing it, I took a deep breath and started over, again and again.

Three-four songs later, my fingers had slowly relaxed, completely blocking out Mr. Preston. He just sat there silently; it was almost as if he wasn’t even breathing. That would be a welcome twist, I thought.

I lost myself in the ivory keys, diving into the heart of the instrument. It didn’t feel like the high I’d experienced on stage. No, this moment was more intimate, more intense.

I still couldn’t play, and it sounded nothing like it used to, but part of my fear had faded as the notes died away—for now.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my professor light a cigarette and take a deep drag. Oh, how I would have reached for the pack, but he probably would have cut my fingers off for it.

“Don’t even think about it,” he said dangerously low when he saw me staring at the smoke.

I raised my hands defensively and suppressed a grin. Just as he was about to say something else, someone knocked on the door and entered.

Noah smiled when he saw me sitting at the piano, surely knowing I hadn’t played in a long time.

“Are you done or am I interrupting?” he asked, his gaze fixed on me as Mr. Preston’s lay on him. If looks could kill, Noah would have died a thousand deaths by now.

“No, you’re not interrupting. Come on, let’s go. I’m done for the day.” Glad to have someone in the room I didn’t suspect of murder, I stood up and smoothed out my skirt. He took my satchel, as he had last time, and held the door open for me.

I glanced over my shoulder, looking into my professor’s piercing eyes before Noah closed it and followed me out into the hallway.

“Does Mr. Preston seem strange to you sometimes, too?” I asked my escort blatantly as we walked past a group of students.

“What do you mean?” He frowned.

“I don’t know. His whole behavior is so contradictory. He obviously doesn’t care about anything and yet there are moments...” I shook my head, wanting to stop myself from saying things that could get me or him in trouble.

You shouldn’t judge hastily and to be honest, I couldn’t imagine that he could seriously hurt anyone, but that little seed of doubt was now planted in my brain, the weeds already sown.

“He can be a real asshole, but if you knew his dad, you would understand why he is so fucked up. The apple doesn’t fall far from the rotten tree.”

“You know his father?” I couldn’t help but feel sorry for Mr. Preston. Who knows what kind of messed up shit he had to go through with a father like that.

Noah debated how much to tell me, and I couldn’t help but feel a little hurt at his secrecy.

“Some of us know his family. And his family knows some of us. Our...circles are very tradition-oriented, almost fanatical. Especially families with influence and power are brutal in their methods of education and in their ways of thinking. You can imagine what that does to you.”

“It suffocates.” I stroked my face, let the words run through my head until terrible images played out in my mind’s eye.

How I would have loved to set his father’s house on fire too until it was nothing but ashes on scorched earth.

“Yes, sometimes you forget what humanity is. Especially in our families.” I had the feeling that we were no longer talking about Mr. Preston, but that Noah was sharing his upbringing. It must have been tough, and I felt sorry for him.

He playfully bumped his shoulder against mine and gestured for me to hurry.

“I’m sure you won’t forget who you really are.” I gave him a smile, an honest, unspoiled one that few could see.

He did not return it.

“And I’m sure this place is nothing for you.”



I HAD BARELY TAKEN off my shoes and threw my satchel on the bed when my tablet rang. Who would call me? It wasn’t particularly late, the sun had barely set, but still. My gaze

caught on the familiar phone number, and it felt like all life had been drained out of me. *Dad.*

I hadn't heard his voice in such a long time, had missed him so much that it almost hurt.

I quickly pressed *accept* but couldn't get a word out.

"Hi Avery, it's dad," he said, voice shaking. I couldn't swallow the lump in my throat.

"He- hey," I stammered, "how are you?" He cleared his throat, as if he felt my struggle, too.

"I just left from your grandmother's, you know how she is. She told me to say hello to you and..." He fell silent and I read between the lines that his mother was the driving force of our conversation. "Avery, I know our life wasn't always easy, that I could never replace your mother. I was never able to fill that void in your life and sometimes I think I failed."

My eyes filled with tears as I listened to my father's tormented words. "But know this, I will always love you, will always be by your side, no matter how many pseudo-academies stand between us. And I know for sure that your mother would have spoken the same words. She was always much softer than me. Some might have seen it as weakness, but I saw how strong it had made her. You are so much like her and yet you come after me, stubborn, hot-headed," he said laughing and yet I heard his voice crack, could practically see the tears on his cheeks.

"I'm so sorry I let you down." That was all I could get out. It was the truth. I had hurt the person who had given everything for me, had crushed his feelings.

"I just need to know one thing: did you have a good reason?"

I wiped away the tears and cleared my throat, not wanting to show him what it was like inside me, not wanting to make him worry.

"Many, many very good reasons. You would have done the same in my place, maybe even worse." Silence followed,

neither of us saying anything, and I was beginning to fear he hadn't heard me, but then he spoke up again.

"Then I trust your judgment and when we meet again, I want to know the whole story, no talking around it." I nodded, knowing full well that he wouldn't see it.

"I miss you," I whispered.

"I miss you too, kiddo. The house is so quiet without you," he joked. Of course, there was no one left to torture him with the worst hits of the last few decades. "Are they being nice to you?" The seriousness in his tone came back, the concern unmistakable.

"Yes," I replied, genuinely happy, "I've even become... friends with three of them." It was hard to admit this thing, but I couldn't escape the fact that Leilah, Caleb, and Noah had grown on me—more than I liked.

"I'm happy for you. They're lucky to have you in their lives," he replied, and I could feel his grin through the tablet. After what had happened back then, I'd never uttered the word friends again.

"And Dad?" I didn't know how he would take this next bit of news.

"Yes, sweetie?"

"I've been playing again," I whispered.

It got dead quiet on the other end; you could almost hear a pin drop. I wasn't even sure he'd understood my words until I heard his sobs. My father, a tough guy I had never seen cry, sobbed when he heard I had touched a piano again.

"I'm proud of you." I hadn't known how much I wanted to hear those words, needed to hear them. They felt like water in the desert, like a warm meal for a starving person.

"So am I." For many, that might have been a small step, but for me, it was a step out of the darkness.

After using the remaining few minutes to tell my father about school and classes, the line finally cut off. We were only allowed thirty minutes, but those thirty minutes had been enough to make my heart feel a little lighter.

“I’m in the mood for something sweet, cake maybe,” Leilah said as she came out of the bathroom, startling me.

“I can’t help you with that one,” I replied.

“We’ll get something.” I raised an eyebrow.

“From where? The cafeteria is already closed.” She just shrugged.

“I know a way, and you’ll come with me.” How I would have loved to eat cake right now, but the fear of getting caught outweighed. Besides, Mr. Preston had said I shouldn’t wander around at night.

On the other hand, I wondered since when I listened to a man who was not my father.

“I’m in.” My roommate looked at me with a devilish smile.

“Then put on your shoes and jacket. It’s going to be cold.” I could hardly help but return her smile. Judging by her tone, her plan was pretty risky, and I was down for it.

Five minutes later, we were already hanging out the window and dropping onto the frozen earth, the moon already

at its zenith. A faint mist curled around our ankles, making the setting seem almost surreal.

Leilah supposedly knew a back entrance to the kitchen, but I feared we wouldn't find it tonight. Judging by her hurried look, she knew that this action could break our necks.

"Hurry," she urged, and I mentally gave her the middle finger.

I wasn't cut out for sports, certainly not any in my pajamas in the freezing cold. My protesting thighs were evidence of that. Two turns later, we finally arrived.

In front of us was a more secluded building, its facade without a door. Only the low-lying shattered window offered a way to enter.

Hold on, she didn't expect...

"Now don't look at me like that and help me up." I narrowed my eyes.

"Are you for real?" Leilah gestured for me to give her a leg up and I grudgingly did as she asked.

"Why do I have to help you up and not the other way around?" She giggled as she placed her foot on my interlocked fingers.

"That if anyone is upstairs, I'll be the first to get caught and you can run away, dumbass."

Okay, that was a pretty sweet of her but still...

"Alright, make it quick. If we get caught here together, I'll drag you with me and we can share a cell."

She muttered something unintelligible and got to work. I had overestimated myself and gasped at the sudden weight on my hands. My fingers were burning under her shoes, and I almost dropped her when suddenly she took a hold of the sill.

"There we go. Now push me up." I groaned as I mustered the last bit of strength I had to do so.

Leilah effortlessly pulled herself all the way up. Apparently, her slender arms were stronger than I thought.

With ease, she swung first one leg and then the other over the sill and disappeared inside.

A moment later, she stuck her head out and held out a hand to me.

“I can’t do that. I’m sure you aren’t strong enough to pull me up.” She considered for a moment.

“Use the nooks to push yourself up. We can do this.”

Skeptically following her instruction, I grabbed her sweaty hand and did as she ordered. “That’s it,” she said as she hoisted me up with ease. Man, the woman had strength. No matter what she ate, I wanted the same thing.

My hand finally touched the musty sill, shards of glass splattered everywhere.

In my mind’s eye, a dozen scenarios were already playing out of what could happen from now on, and what it would mean for my future.

Someone must have heard us. There was no way around it.

“Don’t worry, I’ll talk us out of it if something happens. You know I have the charms and everything,” my roommate assured me, surely looking through my concern.

“Yeah,” I said, not really convinced by her words.

My ass was already hurting from the short time I sat astride like that. “Move over, I’m coming.”

She took a step back, and I was about to steady myself when a stabbing pain drove through my palm. I drew in a sharp breath. *Shit*. I raised my hand and looked down at the blood streaming down my wrist. There was a large shard of glass in my flesh, and I could barely stop myself from crying out loud.

Leilah’s expression changed. Gone was the sarcastic look. Instead, something else, something dark crept into her features. She took another step back, clawing at a piece of furniture behind her.

“You need to shine a light on my hand so I can see how deep the wound is. Fuck, that hurts. Don’t just stand there, help me.”

But she did not move. Could she not stand the sight of blood? Did she feel sick? I definitely felt sick looking at my palm. “Leilah?” She didn’t respond. With wobbly legs, I stepped closer to my roommate, who stood there like a statue, her face almost mask-like.

“Don’t come closer,” she hissed. Her sharp tone, so unlike her nature, irritated me.

I tried to fish the tablet out of the pocket of my jacket and unlock it, which was hard to do with one hand. My palm was throbbing, and the pain was almost unbearable, but somehow, I turned on the flashlight function and held the bright light on the injured area.

It definitely looked as bad as it felt. The hem of my sleeve was already stained dark red, the tiny room soaked in the metallic smell. I shone the light on Leilah’s face, wanting to see if she was okay.

The sight of her made my blood freeze. Her ravenous eyes were red, the skin beneath them ringed with black veins. She seemed paler than usual, her gaze more rigid.

A moment later, her face was back to normal, and I questioned my sanity. Had I lost so much blood that I was already hallucinating? That’s how it had to be.

Before I could form a clear thought, I staggered to the side, just barely able to brace myself against a small table.

Leilah was immediately at my side, her arm protectively around me, but she didn’t speak a word. It was almost as if she wasn’t even breathing.

“I have to go to the nurse,” I stammered.

“It’s too far to get there. I can’t...,” she hissed between clenched teeth. She couldn’t do what? Accompany me?

“Fuck, do you want me to fucking bleed to death? I’m going alone.” I tore away from her, even got a few steps away

before my field of vision darkened and I had to grab onto a wall.

“I’ll-I’ll get help. Wait here,” she said hurriedly, but something else resonated in her tone. Fear? No, I couldn’t name it.

Before I could blink, she was gone, and I was left alone. My thoughts were whirling, my heart hammering in my chest.

Buried images resurfaced in my mind’s eye. No, it’s not the same, I kept telling myself. But no matter how many times I recited this sentence, the rising feeling of panic did not fade away.

I couldn’t breathe and it felt like tons of weights were pressing on my chest. My legs gave way under me, and I let myself slide down the wall. *She will come back, she will come back, she will come back.* Leilah would not leave me alone.

My fingers went numb, and my lips tingled strangely. I just wanted to close my eyes for a minute, just a minute. Then I would get up and go to the nurse. Yes, for sure.

My eyes got heavier and heavier and before I could catch myself, I slumped to the side.



ROUGH HANDS GRABBED my upper arms and shook me.

“No, she’s coming back. Leilah won’t leave me behind,” I screeched with what little strength I had left as I flailed wildly, fending off the intruder and hurting my hand even more.

“It’s me, Alexander, calm down,” a deep, threatening voice rang out. It could just as well have come from my subconscious or my imagination.

I opened my eyes a crack and saw black hair, a little curly at the ends. I could have recognized it anywhere. “Give me your hand. No, the injured one, little brat.”

I did as he asked and before I knew it, a pain straight out of hell ripped through me. I looked down and saw that he had

pulled the big shard of glass out of me.

His gaze darkened as he looked down at all the blood, his eyes blazing with.... With what? I didn't have time to think. He was already pressing a scrap of cloth onto the deep wound. Unbearable flames leeches into my flesh, tearing at my skin.

What had he soaked this cloth in? Battery acid? All too soon, the agonizing pain was replaced by pure ecstasy. A soft moan escaped my lips as sheer bliss raced through my veins.

I clung to this feeling, wanting to lose myself in it, to be possessed by it. The pain was gone. My body rode the wave of desire, of euphoria.

I looked down at myself. The bleeding had stopped. Only my blood-soaked sleeve was proof of what had happened to me just a few moments ago.

"I can't stay here, I'm sorry," a woman's voice whispered from behind Mr. Preston. Leilah. She had come back. For *me*.

"Go. We'll talk tomorrow," he countered in a tone that revealed tomorrow would not be her favorite day. And not mine, either.

I was still far too dizzy to understand what had just happened, knowing only that the pain in my arm had completely subsided.

I straightened up and looked into his piercing eyes. Despite his concern, I saw the anger at our careless actions in his gaze. He crouched next to me in his gray sweatpants and dark hoodie, looking nothing like a professor with his wild hair, but more like the temptation of hell itself.

But there was also that voice in the back of my mind, screaming at me to run, to never let him near me again. This warning was like a constant presence in my subconscious.

Did I feel this way because I had overheard the conversation between the two women, or was this fear, this primal instinct, coming from within me?

"If Leilah had come just a few moments later, you'd be dead now. Be glad she was in good form," he hissed.

In good form? What did he mean by that? Before I could ask, he straightened and pulled me up with him.

“You need to take off that blood-soaked thing before we go.” He pointed to my pajama shirt.

What was the problem with that? It wasn't like many people would see me at this hour. He must have noticed my questioning expression because he added, “Trust me. You better not draw the wrong kind of attention to yourself.”

“I don't exactly have a lot of choices here,” I rasped, my throat sore. “Or should I walk around the school topless?” He snorted in annoyance.

“Of course not.” His tone had dropped an octave. I didn't have time to protest before he pulled his hoodie over his head, exposing flawless skin, chest and stomach defined.

I couldn't take my eyes off him. “Now get undressed too,” he added, annoyed when he saw I made no move.

“Turn around,” I finally brought out, forcing myself to look in a different direction. He raised his eyebrows.

“Like I haven't seen that already, and a lot more. Don't be so coy.” Was he trying to test me at this exact moment?

“Turn around. Now.” He finally followed my command, but I could still hear him mumbling, “So bossy.”

With shaking hands, I took off my dirty jacket and shirt and the cold air kissed my bare skin. Apparently, there was no damn heater in this godforsaken room.

Goosebumps spread across my chest. But maybe that was just because I felt my professor's presence all too clearly in front of me. He wasn't looking back, and yet I felt his gaze on me.

He handed me his hoodie, and I put it on, the material like a warm embrace. His unmistakable scent hit my nose, enveloping me, and I hated myself for breathing in deeper.

I was alone with him, a potential killer, and I reveled in his scent. What was wrong with me? Was I that fucked up?

“Are you done already?” he asked, annoyed.

“Yeah, you can turn around again.” He took my jacket and shirt and crumpled them into a bundle so the blood wouldn’t show. “I’d better get back to my room. You can yell at me tomorrow, but right now, I’m too exhausted.” Mr. Preston’s eyes narrowed.

“You can’t go back tonight.” His voice was determined, almost threatening. Had I heard him correctly?

“What do you mean?” My professor looked at me as if I had asked the stupidest thing of all time. A pause formed, during which he surely weighed his words.

“You’re not safe there. Believe me, the last place you want to be right now is in your room.”

I crossed my arms, watching him, his posture, his expression.

“And where do you want me to sleep tonight, professor?”

“With me.”

Reluctantly, I sneaked with him along the seemingly endless hallways, not a soul in sight.

It was dark, only one side of his body illuminated by the candles. I didn't understand why I couldn't just go back to my room, and he evaded my questions with cryptic answers.

A night alone with him? Instead of the thrill, fear spread through me, a fear that went deeper, a warning of my primal instinct. So much could happen, and yet I couldn't let him see my concerns. Who knows what was going on in his head right now, if he was plotting something, lulling me into safety only to break my neck. No, that wasn't possible. Or was it?

A turn further on, we reached the faculty's wing, just as badly lit and in a certain way gloomier. It was almost colder than at our place, or was that my freezing blood?

"We're here. Don't make a sound," he whispered, barely audible. Really, Sherlock? I was just alone with a professor in the middle of the night, dressed in his hoodie. I wouldn't be so brain-dead as to get caught.

Luckily, he didn't catch me rolling my eyes.

He opened the squeaky door and turned on a small lamp at the entrance. Wide-eyed, I looked around, intimidated by the homeliness.

His large bed was on the right side, with the headboard against the wall. The window gave an incredible view of the woods and the full moon above. In front of the window was a

piano, not as elegant as the one in his office, yet perfect. The wood in the fireplace on the left side of the room was barely burning, ember casting a golden glow on the furniture. Books were scattered everywhere, apparently with no system. On the small table next to his bed was a bottle of whiskey and a half-full glass.

It seemed like he hadn't been sleeping before Leilah had dragged him to me. Why Mr. Preston, of all people? Well, I preferred him to any other professor or, God forbid, the principal.

"You can go take a shower over there." He pointed his finger at the door that probably led to the bathroom, and I became all too aware of how much I had invaded his private space. "I'll give you something of mine to sleep in. Go, I'll pick something out."

With a nod, I disappeared through the narrow door and ended up in a bathroom that was much more modern than ours. The rain shower was framed by two glass walls so everyone could see in, the sink made of black stone.

I stripped off my clothes, my skin so heated that I didn't freeze anymore. Even the initially cool water could do nothing about it. I was naked, my professor only a few steps away.

I don't know how long I just stood there, the glass long since completely fogged. My thoughts swirled only around the incident with Leilah and the terrible pain I had felt just a little while ago.

I looked at my palm, the wound already healing. How was that possible? Such a deep cut could not heal so quickly.

Was I hallucinating? Had he dipped that piece of cloth into some new drugs? I must have gone crazy. So many things just didn't add up, and I couldn't find a plausible explanation for at least one strange event.

I put on a last layer of soap that smelled a little like Mr. Preston, washed off the lather, and stepped out.

There was a pile of towels on a dresser, and I grabbed one, almost rubbing myself raw because I wanted to buy time. But

what was I running from? I was already trapped.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw fresh clothes, which meant he had been in here while I hadn't been paying attention to the door.

Had he seen me naked, watched me take a shower? No, impossible. The fogging on the glass had shrouded me from prying eyes.

I put on the long T-shirt and sweatpants. Since there was no hair dryer here, I had no choice but to step out of the bathroom with wet hair.

Mr. Preston sat in an armchair in front of the fireplace, nipping at the whiskey, until his eyes met mine.

“Go to sleep,” he ordered, but I didn't budge.

“We need to talk about tonight.” He narrowed his eyes.

“There's nothing to talk about.” I raised my hand, showing him my palm.

“And what's that?” I said worriedly. If he was taken aback, he didn't show it.

“What about it?” Did he really want to play this game?

“The wound is almost healed. That's impossible,” I hissed, getting annoyed with him.

“It wasn't deep. I put some medicine on it, a family recipe.” My professor shrugged.

Not deep? My sleeve was soaked in blood. I shook my head.

“That's not true. Besides, what about Leilah? Why couldn't I go back to her?”

Her eyes came back into my mind, the expression in them. It wasn't normal. I didn't have the courage to ask him about that detail yet.

He drank the last sip of the alcohol, put the glass on the floor, and closed the distance between us, his stride more elegant than a cat's.

“Your friend is not feeling well. She can’t stand the sight of blood. That’s all. You interpret too much into trivial things.” He stood far too close to me, so that our body heat mixed.

“Bullshit. Besides, there’s no blood on me now, so going back wouldn’t be a problem. Tell me what’s going on,” I demanded, my anger slowly boiling up.

“You’re asking too many questions whose answers could cost you your head, little brat.” Irritated, I looked into his eyes, which seemed a little darker than usual.

“And you speak in too many riddles that get on my last nerve. I’m tired of your games.” He snorted.

“You think this is all a game?” He pointed across his room. “Nothing here is a game, remember that. Danger waits around every corner of this fucking school.”

“Does that include you, too?” I asked, crossing my arms.

“Especially me.” That had caught me off guard. So my assumptions were correct or did he mean something different?

“Then why are you putting me in danger?” He took a step closer and grabbed me by the hair, yanking my head back so he could look down at me.

It didn’t hurt, yet my scalp burned under his touch.

“Because you love it.” His grip tightened. “And because I can’t help it.” My lips parted slightly. His face came closer to mine, our mouths only inches apart. “Now go to sleep. The interrogation is over.”

“And where do you sleep?” My eyes wandered to the bed, big enough for two people.

“I’ll be fine.” He made a head movement toward the armchair, and I rolled my eyes.

I wasn’t here to take his place, and since he insisted I couldn’t return to my room tonight, I’d have to share the bed with him, whether or not I liked it.

“Come sleep with me,” was the only thing I replied. The crooked smile I hated so much, yet loved a little, resurfaced.

“You want me to sleep with you, little brat?” I rolled my eyes.

“Next to me.” With those words, I turned around and got into his bed, much cozier than mine.

His sheets smelled like him, and the pillow nestled perfectly against the back of my head. It was almost like it was made for me.

Slowly, he walked to the other side, keeping his eyes on me the whole time. Mr. Preston pulled the blanket aside and lay down at a proper distance. He was so far away and yet I could feel him so close to me.

I couldn't help but turn on my side and look at him as he did the same. A moment of silence followed in which we just stared at each other, the air electrified.

“Don't look at me like this, Avery.” His voice was low, menacing, like a predator's warning.

I blinked.

“How?” I whispered.

“You know exactly what I mean. I'm your *professor*.”

“I know.” He shook his head.

“No, you don't.” I moved a little closer, barely a few inches, and yet it felt like much more.

“Then don't do the same, *professor*.”

His hand extended, and I flinched, but all he wanted to do was brush a curl out of my face.

“I can't.” A fire, not of desire but something else I couldn't describe, burned in his eyes.

“Do you want to kiss me?” I asked, my words barely audible.

“No.” His answer was firm, definitive.

“Why not?” We had already crossed several lines.

“Because I wouldn't be able to stop.” My lips parted slightly, unable to say anything back. “It's not a game

anymore, Avery.”

No, it wasn't. Banter and messages were one thing, this was something else, an abyss I couldn't approach.

I closed my eyes and exhaled slowly.

“Good night.” He didn't reply. I just felt him shift his weight, but I didn't dare open my eyes. The warmth of his body was heavier, his scent lulled me to sleep until I drifted off into the infinite darkness.



I WAS LYING on the ground, mud soaking into my clothes. It was cold, so damn cold. The surrounding trees bowed to the unyielding wind that blasted that night.

I looked up—looked into Leilah's face, her eyes. They were inhuman, black. Dark veins snaked around her eyes, reaching her cheeks.

She licked over her pointed canines, ready to attack me. No, this wasn't Leilah, my friend. A bloodthirsty monster was rearing up above me.

I tried to push off with my feet, to escape from her—in vain. My hand ran over something hard, and I looked to the right, saw Olivia's rotten face next to me.

Only then I could scream, could rage and lash out with my hands. Saliva gathered in my mouth, a gag reflex impossible to suppress. She laughed, a diabolical laugh that did not fit her character at all. Then the monster jumped on top of me and....

“Wake up,” someone shouted while shaking me by the shoulders. I opened my eyes and looked into the worried face of my professor, who was kneeling over me.

“Olivia...Leilah,” was all I could get out. He lay down next to me again, close this time, his body pressed against mine, and I felt my heartbeat slowly calm down. It felt good to have him this close next to me. Way too good.

“Just a nightmare,” he assured me. But I couldn’t suppress the images that played out in my mind’s eye. Again and again, I saw Leilah’s eyes, her hungry gaze. Why was my subconscious afraid of her, my only friend?

My breathing was shallow and uneven, my fingers trembling. Was I having a panic attack? No, not here, please, not here, I kept repeating to myself.

He propped himself up so we could look at each other.

“I’m scared,” I whispered.

It was the truth I didn’t want to admit to myself. And I didn’t just mean the night and the nightmare.

No, it was something deeper than that. I was afraid I would never find myself again, never feel pure happiness again. I was afraid of disappointing my father, of disappointing myself. I was afraid of my past, I was afraid of the present and I was afraid of the future, of my failure.

But most of all, I was afraid of him, of the things he could unleash in me, maybe had already unleashed.

His gaze changed, softened, and yet there was a certain hardness in his features that he could never fully shake off.

“I’m scared too.” Something told me those words had taken more out of him than he could ever admit.

I lifted my hand and ran it over his jaw, his cheek, and he did something I hadn’t expected—he closed his eyes and leaned into my touch. Was he as lonely as I was?

Yes, yes, he was.

“Do you want to kiss me now?” He waited, fighting an internal battle that only he could win.

“Yes,” he whispered, his eyes still closed.

“Then kiss me.” Exhaling slowly, he leaned down.

Then his lips met mine.

It wasn’t one of those rushing kisses that cried out for pure desire, but one that laid bare the soul and opened the heart.

His lips were soft, far too soft, considering his appearance. He ran his tongue over my lower lip. A rough, deep growl escaped him, which gave me goose bumps.

Our kisses became wilder, more passionate. He curled one hand in my hair and pulled, making me moan.

I felt his smile before his mouth moved down to my throat, to the sensitive spot between my ear and jaw. I opened myself wider to him, offering him better access, and he let his teeth trail over my heated skin until it almost hurt. But I enjoyed it, enjoyed the pain.

His mouth found mine again, and it was almost as if I was tasting his lips for the first time. The slight aroma of whiskey still stuck to his tongue, and I had tasted nothing sweeter.

Mr. Preston shifted his weight, slipping one arm under my head and grabbing me by the hair again, while his other hand moved under my shirt to one of my breasts.

I shivered under his cold fingers, but arched up to meet him until he massaged my nipple with his thumb. It felt so good, *he* felt so good.

I reached out and gripped his length, feeling how hard he was just from our kisses. But he pulled my hand away.

Perplexed, I stopped.

“Tonight is not about me,” he whispered in my ear.

Before I could realize it, his hand moved to the waistband of my sweatpants and paused there. His fingers traced the skin beneath.

Fuck, I was drenched from those touches alone, then how would it be if...

“Spread your legs for me, Avie.”

I froze. No one had ever asked that of me before, let alone touched me further down. But I wanted it, wanted him to touch me so badly.

My kisses became more demanding, wilder, and I let it happen, opening up for him.

He wasted no time. Instead his fingers found the exact place I needed them most. His middle finger circled around my most sensitive spot, drawing a hoarsely moan from me, which only motivated him to apply more pressure.

I arched my hips, unable to wait, and he understood. His finger found my entrance, but he didn't slide in, not yet. First, he wanted to play with me, to tease me.

“So wet for me,” he whispered, his voice as soft as butter.

I opened myself wider to him, my thigh pressed against his dick.

I drew in a sharp breath as I felt his finger inside me. It was so unfamiliar, so intense, and I wanted more.

He let it slide in and out, getting greedier with each thrust. His thumb massaged my clit and drove me crazy. My breathing quickened until climax was approaching like a harbinger of ecstasy.

“Come for me, little brat.” He added his ring finger, tips pressing on a spot that drove my lust beyond measure.

God, he was so good at this. His thrusts quickened, the tingling sensations in my lower belly growing stronger. “Yes,” I breathed.



Alexander

EVERY WAS SO FUCKING TIGHT. She felt perfect, her moans the sweetest melody.

The little monster pressed her thigh against my dick, rubbing it with every move she made. If I had less self-control, I would have come long ago. Actually, I had no self-control at all. She was off-limits and yet I lay there listening to her moans, enjoying her wetness on my fingers and whispering her name.

My other hand clutched her brown curls, and I pulled on them exactly how she liked it. She needed this, needed me,

and I needed to feel her. Just once, I told myself, then we'll stop forever.

I pushed my fingers deeper inside her, pressing on the spot that would drive her insane. Just like I had driven her insane back in the woods when she had awakened the predator in me, made me dive into my primal instincts and hunt her down. And it had felt so good.

Or when I had lured her out of the room to play with her. I could have had her right then and there, and yet I pulled back, afraid even then of her dark green eyes, of their effect on me.

Her fingernails clawed at my biceps as she came so loudly, I was afraid someone had heard us. Her muscles tightened, squeezing my fingers, and I pushed a little harder, letting her ride that wave.

“Good girl,” I said, and pulled my fingers out, my forehead pressed to hers.

She relaxed in my arm, dropping deeper into the pillow, and I looked down at her one last time, memorizing her satisfied expression, for I would see it for the last time. “And now go to sleep.”



Avery

I HAD NEVER COME SO hard in my life. It was almost like magic, his touch the strongest spell. And we had to stop, for my sake, for his. It was doomed to fail, and yet I nuzzled closer to him, enjoying this moment of peace.

I was no fool, knowing full well that tomorrow everything would go back to the way it was before between us. He would keep his distance and I would let him, because that's the way it had to be.

This night had burned its way into my brain, a memory of the most intense moment I had ever felt.

“Good night, Alexander.” This was the first and last time I had ever spoken his first name out loud. He had called me Avie, so I allowed myself to savor the sound of his name one last time in his presence. *Alexander.*

The sun hadn't even risen yet when I opened my eyes after a nightmare-less sleep.

The place next to me was empty. I brushed my hand over it, the sheets cold. He either left some time ago or was avoiding me. I was fine with both ways, sparing us the awkward silence in the morning, the goodbyes.

I stepped out of bed and put my shoes on, not even bothering to unknot my hair. No one would be in the hallways at this hour. At least that's what I was hoping.

I couldn't find my old clothes anywhere, not that I had planned to put them on since I didn't want to cause Leilah any more stress.

With one last look over my shoulder, I closed the door and made my way to my room, where I needed to talk to my friend. She had some explaining to do.



MY ROOMMATE WAS PLAYING a game on her tablet when I stepped into the room, overtired, my footsteps nearly silent. She looked up with a worried expression, studying my face.

Faster than expected, she straightened up and wrapped her arms around me. I gave her a little kiss on the temple when I noticed her sobbing.

“Why are you crying? Hey, everything’s fine,” I reassured her, but she just shook her head.

“It was horrible. I’m so sorry, I failed you,” she muttered, her voice trembling.

“You didn’t fail me. You came back. That was more than my former friends had ever done for me.”

“I almost lost control. I’m so young, please, I’m sorry,” she said, repeating the last part over and over again. What did she mean by that?

“I don’t understand,” I returned, confused. She just shook her head.

“Be thankful you don’t.” I pushed her away from me, inspecting her face as she ran her sleeve over her face.

She looked the same as always, no sign of her frightening features from earlier.

I must have gone crazy. Yes, for sure. “What?” she asked, catching my skeptical look. I let go of her and she sat down on her bed, me next to her.

“This place, it’s fucking with my head.” Her eyes grew more wary, and yet they still seemed gentle, understanding.

“Not just with yours.” I fixed her with my serious gaze. No games, no riddles. The truth.

I lifted my hand and stroked Leilah’s delicate skin under her eyes. She let me, didn’t shrink back.

“Did I imagine it, Leilah?” My voice, low and determined, trembled slightly.

The very fact that I spoke those words was insane. She held my gaze, her features tense.

“Do you want to die?” she asked. It was a serious question, I realized, saw it in her expression.

“No.” My friend gave me a smile that did not reach her eyes.

“Then you must never ask that again.”



I LAY in my bed and stared at the ceiling. My thoughts were all over the place, but they always ended up at the same point: the secrets of Preston Academy.

“Why did you call Mr. Preston, of all people?” I finally asked.

“I knew for sure he wouldn’t rat us out.” I looked at her, a mischievous grin on her lips.

“And how were you so sure?”

“Because we’re related,” she replied with amusement, as if the fact that they shared the same blood was funny. “Well, by a hundred degrees, but still. Not that we go on vacation together or he sends us ugly Christmas cards. He doesn’t even come to family reunions. I’ve only seen him a couple of times outside of the academy.”

“Heard his family isn’t the most pleasant company.” She snorted.

“His father, his name is Alexander too,” she said, chuckling, “is hell incarnate. I wonder why his son isn’t more screwed up. I certainly would be with such a family.” From story to story, his family, his circles, became more and more unsympathetic to me. Was he not one of them? After all, he had grown up with their customs. “But I’m sure you know him better, spending as much time as you do together.” Leilah turned onto her side, head on the palm.

“I don’t know him. Not the way you think.” I tried to come across as confident and determined—in vain. She gave me an unimpressed look.

“At least he helped you get dressed. I doubt those men’s clothes are yours.” The soft fabric of his T-shirt nuzzled against my skin, his scent still on it.

“He didn’t undress or dress me,” I returned, rolling my eyes. No, he just made me come so hard I felt dizzy.

“Your business, but you’re playing with fire, Avery, both of you. Watch your back. He’s got enemies.” Enemies? That was a bit dramatic, even by her standards. The only enemy he had was me; at least if he kept being as insulting as he had been the first day.

“There’s no fire. Not for any of us.” I drew the blanket even tighter to my body and closed my eyes. No fire. Leila just mumbled a disbelieving *Mhm* and turned on her other side, surely dead tired. A fire would only burn us out.

I trudged out of the class that was supposed to have been taught by Mr. Preston. He wasn't there, was avoiding me or had better things to do. Maybe he and his aunt were handling the murder case. His case?

Don't jump to conclusions, Avery, I warned myself, couldn't help but water that little seed of doubt.

My eyes were glued to the black tablet, and I was reading the latest posts. Apparently, some people had noticed that there was an unusual smell of blood in one part of the school, and once again, dozens of rumors started.

I looked at my formerly wounded palm. Only a tender scar graced the pale skin.

Do you want to die? Leilah's words crossed my mind again. The question was far too odd. If you followed her logic, then the truth would kill me. That would only mean that the truth was so macabre that outsiders could not know about it under any circumstances.

A shoulder crashed against mine and I stumbled back two steps. Annoyed, I looked up; a student, probably around fourteen, was looking at me with a blank expression on his face.

"Watch your step," he said curtly.

I knew him from somewhere, have seen his dark blond hair in the hall before. He always sat in the front row, his features a mixture of tortured and bored to death. I couldn't blame him.

“Sorry,” I replied, and was about to walk past him when he took a step closer.

That’s when I felt it: the danger, the disgusting feeling I had felt several times at this academy. My body screamed at me to run, to put as much distance as possible between us.

“Avery, isn’t it?” I didn’t intend to answer him, just wanted to remove myself from this situation.

Without wanting to, I opened my mouth. It was almost as if my body no longer obeyed me.

“Yes,” I returned between gritted teeth.

“I’ll join you for a bit.” A grin that was anything but charming crossed his lips. No, certainly *not*.

“Okay, that way.” What the fuck is wrong with you, Avery?

I had to get some papers from my room before I left for my tutoring session. Alone. Still, this creep followed my every step.

“Don’t you want to know my name?” he asked with a blank look, not an ounce of life in his eyes.

“No.” The answer came out harsher than intended, but I cared quite little.

He was the one who had clung to me like a leech. Was he that bored or just lonely?

“Flavian.” Okay, Flavian, fuck off. “Flavian Arden,” he added, and my eyes nearly fell out of their sockets.

Arden, as in Penelope Arden? A relative? They’d have the same hair color, even the aristocratic features.

I didn’t answer. If this guy was going to tell around that I was disrespectful to him, I could kiss my place here goodbye.

“Your hair smells so masculine. What shampoo do you use?” I didn’t know if he was joking or if he was seriously interested in my grooming products. Or rather, Mr. Preston’s grooming products.

The corner of his mouth twitched barely, the only emotion I had noticed from him.

“I can’t remember.” That wasn’t a lie.

“It almost seems like I’ve smelled it before.” Can this guy finally shut up?

“I’ll send you a picture as soon as I figure it out,” I returned dryly.

“I insist.” Yeah, better insist you fuck off already.

He had the charm of a roadkill squirrel and was pushy as a missionary. Not a desirable combination.

A turn later, the hallway now less well lit, my room came into view, and I exhaled in relief. Soon I was rid of this odd kid.

He said nothing, and I was not eager to make conversation. His aura was just too repulsive.

“I have to go now.” I was about to turn away from him when he grabbed my shoulder.

The same feeling I had with Olivia washed over me. Eyes wide and pulse racing, I stepped back. The fight-or-flight reaction kicked in, but something stopped me from screaming and running away.

“Will you let me in?” He came toward me, fixing me with his lifeless gaze. No, no, I’m *not* letting you in. I pressed my lips together, trying not to say anything. My body would betray me, I knew that.

“Open your mouth, Avery.” I shook my head. Not today, Satan, not today.

Another step and the tips of our shoes touched. He smelled of...darkness. I shuddered. “I’ll count to three.”

That’s probably as far as he could, anyway. Not a good time to crack jokes about him. Not when this kid disturbed me more than the most brutal horror movie.

“One...” My throat tightened. What the hell? I couldn’t breathe, clutching at my throat, but felt no strange hands or

ropes.

I tried to inhale, but it was almost as if I had no lungs at all.

My back slammed against the wall, his amused expression on me. Is this what suffocation felt like? My chest ached; everything inside me squirmed.

Stop it, stop it, stop it, I screamed at him in my mind, but he didn't hear me.

My sight was slowly darkening, and I knew I was about to pass out.

“Get out of the way, weirdo,” a feminine voice said beside me and pushed him away, causing his eyes to blaze.

For a millisecond, I imagined finding the same black veins under his eyes, but before I could even blink, they were gone. Lack of air, that's what was driving me crazy.

The tightness in my chest dissipated, and my lungs filled with sweet oxygen. God, I was on the verge of collapse. My heart was hammering so hard I was afraid it would tear through my rib cage.

“Why are you still standing here like an idiot? Piss off before I wipe the floor with you,” she hissed at him and he clenched his hands into fists, turned his back on us and disappeared.

If I wasn't in such shock from almost choking, I would have even laughed.

“What the hell was that?” I almost screamed, and she looked at me worriedly. “And don't ask me if I want to die, Leilah.” My tone was harsh, unyielding, and she exhaled slowly.

“Let's go inside. I can only tell you the bare minimum. Come.” She wrapped her arm around my shoulder and steadied me as we silently strode to our room.

I dropped onto the bed and Leilah handed me a glass of water, which I chugged in just a few gulps. My throat burned as if someone had choked me. The bitter aftertaste of the

ordeal was still stuck in my mouth, and I couldn't help but grab my throat every now and then, making sure the invisible ropes were gone.

This thing he had done had changed everything, had changed all my beliefs and made me tremble to the core. I closed my eyes, but the boy's face emerged from the dark, his smile diabolical.

"Tell me," I begged my roommate, and she sat down at my feet, playing with the hem of her skirt.

"There are some things you could never understand. And that's the way it should be. But there's also a lot you need to know. It's dangerous here, far too dangerous, and humans are so fragile." I didn't miss the way she pronounced the word *human*. "There are people in this academy who want to harm you, who want to harm many students like you."

"That doesn't explain what that psycho did to me earlier in the hallway," I returned harshly, and bit my tongue, not wanting to offend her.

"Penelope's brother is strange. He loves to torture people, to play with them. He can be very creative and has the...power to do what he wants as long as some of us aren't around. I'm older than him and much stronger, but you..." A moment of silence arose. "You're easy prey for him."

My lips parted, bewildered by what I just heard. I had expected something like hypnosis, but never bizarre *powers*. I framed my next question more hesitantly, careful of my choice of words.

"And you know so much about this because you can...do the same thing to people." Not a question, but a statement.

She didn't answer, but that was answer enough.

"You can't tell a soul what happened. Never. Not even Noah or Caleb, and certainly not the faculty." Mr. Preston included, I understood between her lines.

I let her words run through my mind, but I couldn't sort out my thoughts at that moment. Defeated, I nodded, and she closed her eyes in relief.

“Avery?” my friend asked, bringing me back to the here and now. “You can always feel safe with me.” I pressed my lips together, ignoring the tingling sensation that welled up in my eyes.

Feel safe... Rationally, I should have screamed, raged, or run away. But right now, I wasn't a rational person. Instead, I did what a friend should do. I stroked her hair and nodded. “I know.”



LEILAH HAD TAKEN me back to my professor's office. She had insisted on not letting me out of her sight for the rest of the day.

Finally, I hurried her away and knocked. Mr. Preston was probably angry that I had been late, but it wasn't my fault that I had been attacked by a mad fourteen-year-old with some kind of alien powers.

My roommate had flatly refused to tell me more, had insisted that I stop probing for the rest of my life.

Of course, I would not let her words stop me. I was still in shock, had not gotten over what had happened, and was just waiting for when all the impressions would finally hit me. Then I would still have time to scream and run away.

I wasn't an overly fearful person. This side was washed away after the accident and for a long time, I couldn't feel anything at all. I was still not the same, but every day I tried to take a step forward towards the woman I once was.

My eyes scanned the small room, my professor not here yet. This was strange, especially since he was meticulously punctual and detested such disrespectful behavior.

Sighing, I lowered my satchel to the floor, my gaze fixed on the piano. There was no one to be seen, so I did something very, very stupid and willingly sat down on the bench. You'll regret this, said the quiet voice in my head, but I blanked it out, blocked its access to my soul.

My fingers touched the keys and high, oh so sweet tones sounded. Just once...*please*.

I tensed my hand muscles and relaxed them again until I was sure that the peace would last at least for a few minutes.

A melody from my childhood filled the room packed with dusty books. It was delicate, barely a whisper, nothing like the concerts I had had in the past. And yet this solo was worth more than a million clapping hands.

My muscles remembered the rhythm of the song, gentle, like little waves on a sunny day. Yes, that's good. My chest stung, not from sadness, but from the pure happiness of that moment.

Promise me it's forever, I heard my voice echoing in my brain. *Forever*, said a male voice, deep and yet full of life.

My fingers slipped from the keys. Irritated, I looked behind me. Perhaps this dark blond monster had played a trick on me, but there was no one.

I stroked my face in frustration. Pull yourself together, you were just daydreaming. I shook my head and stood up. My gaze turned to the clock on the desk.

My professor was already half an hour late, and I felt dumped. Should I just leave? I had better things to do than wait for him all day. Well, to be honest, I had nothing to do, but it was a matter of principle.

I was just about to get back into the armchair when an idea struck me. Since Mr. Preston hadn't considered canceling, I might as well snoop around and find answers for his strange behavior.

Maybe I'd find something that would incriminate him. Olivia's case would be settled, and her parents could finally say goodbye. They deserved to know who the killer was and since the principal had to protect someone, my first thought fell on the black-haired professor with way too many secrets.

I opened the door a crack so I could hear the footsteps in the hallway and slipped over to his side of the desk.

Rushed, I tugged at the drawers, but as I had feared, they were locked. Damn, if I were caught in this situation, I would see the cell faster than I could count to three.

I pricked up my ears, but no sound came from outside. I was running out of time and had to act quickly. Just then, a brainwave hit me.

I pulled a bobby pin out of my hair and repeated what a former neighbor had taught me. I hadn't broken in anywhere, but sometimes the lock to the mailbox would jam and I had to get creative. These easy locks shouldn't be a problem.

I slid the bobby pin into the hole and twisted it around until the drawer opened with a faint sound. The sight disappointed me.

All that lay before me was homework, with far too many red annotations. I rummaged through the papers briefly until the tests for history and philosophy caught my eye. It wasn't what I was looking for, but it wouldn't hurt to improve my grades a bit.

Without hesitation, I grabbed my tablet and took pictures of the pages. Leilah, Caleb, and Noah would love that present, I thought to myself. I put the tests back in place.

My fingers quailed as I opened drawer after drawer, but found nothing incriminating. In the third drawer, he had hidden his cigarettes, and I put two in my pocket. Maybe my roommate smoked too.

The last locked compartment called me, urging me to hurry.

How could it be otherwise, footsteps sounded in the hallway, two voices, one male and one female, talking not too quietly.

I had no time to leave, and I didn't want to have come here for nothing either. No, I hadn't risked this little shit torturing me even more.

The footsteps got louder, and I frantically moved the bobby pin, taking twice as long to pick the damn lock.

My potential executioners were barely a few feet from the office.

Click. The drawer opened, inviting me to snoop. The two people were so close I could make out what they were talking about.

Oh God no, it was Mr. Preston and...Ms. Arden. Shit, I was fucked. My eyes slid over the junk in the last drawer until I could make out a dark scarf in the far corner. I pulled it out and stared down; it was covered in blood.

Where had I seen it before?

I fumbled for the label where the student's name should be. Every garment provided by the academy had it. That way, our uniforms wouldn't get mixed up when being washed.

All life drained from my body as I looked at the name—
Olivia S.

I knelt like a fool under Mr. Preston's desk, which fortunately was built to shield me from the outer world.

Every step he took made me wince, my body overflowing with adrenaline. I just prayed that he wouldn't sit down, that he had just forgotten something.

Speaking of forgetting...my satchel. I had set it down next to his desk. It shone in the room like a glowing neon sign: Avery James is kneeling under the desk, almost pissing herself with fear.

"Are you coming to dinner with my father next weekend?" Penelope asked, her voice as soft as a summer breeze.

Mr. Preston stopped beside the desk, just in front of my satchel. The hope that he wouldn't notice it vanished like a speck of dust in the wind.

Before I knew it, he shifted his weight and elegantly kicked the bag under the desk, hidden from Penelope's eyes. Why had he done that?

At that moment, I couldn't think about it, because he strode around the corner and sat down on the leather chair, his knees close to my face. Fuck. I tried to breathe as quietly as possible, not to make a sound, and yet I felt like my pounding heartbeat was echoing throughout the room.

"I don't know yet," he returned curtly, obviously disinterested by the prospect of spending time with her family.

The chair's castors squeaked and before I knew it, he had moved so far forward that my head was only inches from his crotch. This bastard had done it on purpose, knowing full well that I was hiding down here.

His body heat mixed with mine, my senses all too alerted by his proximity. No, stop thinking anything inappropriate, I warned myself, he's a potential killer.

His hips moved a little closer, and I crashed my chin right between his legs. Okay, if he hadn't noticed that I was down here, he certainly knew it now.

His whole body tensed, and he stilled, motionless as a statue.

"Think about it. You haven't been with us for a long time. Besides, my father is already suspicious about the student. I would be grateful if you would lull him into safety. You know how he is when something doesn't go his way." I almost felt sorry for her. With the stories Noah had told me, I could imagine exactly what kind of man her father was.

My professor exhaled in defeat.

"Fine, I'll stop by for a minute." An evening with Ms. Arden, how *nice*, I sneered. This was the most inappropriate moment to be jealous.

These two had a past and a secret that connected them. Me and Alexander had neither, especially no past. And no future.

Stop it, Avery, I admonished myself again.

"Thank you," she replied, her voice more cheerful, girlish.

Without another word, she turned and left the room, her footsteps growing quieter before the tapping sound vanished into thin air.

I knew what was coming—a tantrum. Oh, I would have loved to curl up and die right then and there.

"There we have the little thief." He rolled back and grabbed me roughly by the arm, yanking me up and staring angrily into my eyes, his look the epitome of wrath. "Explain yourself."

How was I supposed to explain myself? I'm sorry, because I was looking for evidence that you could be Olivia's killer? No.

"Don't stand there looking like a moron. Open your mouth." He crossed his arms, growing more impatient with each breath. "Or do you want to take this to the principal?" I pressed my lips together, having to think of what lie to tell him. I was short of time, so my resources were limited.

"Cigarettes, sir." I took them out of my pocket and presented them to him, forcing myself to put on an embarrassed expression. Something told me he didn't quite believe my excuse.

"For two stupid cigarettes you risked your place at the academy? You're dumber than I thought." Ouch.

"Probably. There are *a few* stupid things I've done lately." His jaw tensed, his gaze deadly. I hoped he enjoyed the sideswipe.

"Right, that's why you ended up here. Because you were stupid and wanted to play with fire. Literally." It almost sounded like he was taking my stay here personally.

"My intentions were noble. Something you would never understand. And I would do it again. Always," I hissed, my voice raised. "But what am I talking about? You'll never see me as anything but a criminal." He seemed almost...offended. At least that's how it looked for a moment before he put on his usual expression, his mask.

"My profession doesn't permit me to see anyone here as anything but criminals."

Deep down, I wished he would have asked why I was really here, why I had taken on this burden. But he didn't. He didn't care.

"Then why don't you take me to your aunt, throw me at her feet, point your finger at me? And shove your fucking cigarettes up your ass." I didn't want to lose my temper, but his words had triggered something inside me, a frustration I didn't understand.

“Is that how you talk to a professor?” He took a step closer, and I had nowhere to go, couldn’t avoid his menacing calmness.

“No. That’s how I talk to Alexander Preston,” I hissed.

Something unfamiliar flashed in his blue eyes.

“If you were talking to Alexander Preston, you’d be lying on this desk by now, moaning and begging me not to stop. But you don’t, so get out of here, or you’ll have to keep the cook company in the kitchen for the rest of your stay.” I gritted my teeth, wishing I could have clawed his eyes out.

“If you weren’t my professor, I’d make your life a living hell,” I retorted waspishly.

“You’re already doing that. Go.”

I reached for my satchel and slung it over my shoulder.

Without another word, I disappeared and didn’t look back.

This was *fun*.

Several days had passed, in which I had barely heard from Mr. Preston. He had canceled the tutoring sessions and in class, he had either bullied or ignored me. Not a single day went by where he hadn't thrown mean remarks at me.

Although the others were also not shielded from his questionable teaching methods, none of them felt his wrath as much as I did. Well, maybe Noah did too.

"Put this on," Leilah handed me one of her tops and I took it with wide eyes.

It was off-shoulder and made of silk, had a corsage effect and was flared at the sleeves. The washed out jeans fit loosely and didn't cut into my skin.

My friend had been dying to get me into some of her high heels, but I had declined politely. First, her feet were smaller than mine and second, I would freeze my toes off. Boots would do.

I hadn't dressed up in a while, and since I had promised Noah a while ago that we would head downtown today, I finally had an occasion.

"Noah will love it." I rolled my eyes, had explained to her dozens of times that this date was purely amicable.

We were just two classmates going to a bar after school, nothing else, and I was sure Noah felt the same way. I hadn't missed the way he looked at some girls and guys, so his *courting* didn't have to be on the priority list.

My roommate gave me a dismissive hand gesture and sat down next to Caleb, who was just lying in her bed staring into his tablet while he put his arm around her waist.

I went into the bathroom and changed my clothes, applied makeup, and straightened my hair for the first time in months. I liked the curls better, but every now and then I needed a change, and I wasn't ready to cut it yet, even though it was already way too long and knotted at the back of my head.

After a few sprays of perfume and a close look in the mirror, I stepped out. Leilah gestured for me to turn around and I followed her command.

“We need to capture this moment. My baby is leaving the nest.” She theatrically wiped a tear from her face, and I rolled my eyes.

“The baby will have a fit soon if it doesn't get something to eat. Better hurry.” I squeezed in between the couple and fixed my hair.

“Pull that top down a little, Avery,” she said impatiently, and I gave her a dirty look. Certainly not. It was already showing too much. “Buzzkill.”

She took a few pictures and my cheeks tensed up. Caleb had already stopped looking at the camera and turned his attention to the tablet.

“I think we got it,” I muttered and stood up, but my friend paid no more attention to me. Instead, she looked at the pictures, analyzing every inch and then picking out the best one.

I still had some time before I would meet Noah downstairs and we would ride his motorcycle to the next bigger city. It's going to be a nice evening, I kept telling myself.

While Leilah quite vocally discussed with herself, which was the best of all, I played my music, the headphones still from my professor.



I WAS CAUGHT up in the song when suddenly a notification noise disturbed my peace. Annoyed, I opened the message, only to see that it came from *unknown*.

UNKNOWN:

Where do you think you're going?

Irritated, I looked at the message. It took me a while to figure out what he meant. The photos.

AVERY JAMES:

Are you a stalker or something?

I was tired of his games. Sometimes he was as cold as Antarctica and then he burned me out.

It didn't take long for him to reply.

UNKNOWN:

Answer my question.

I exhaled in annoyance.

AVERY JAMES:

On a date.

Not that my non-existent love life was any of his business, but I couldn't help but rub it in.

UNKNOWN:

With whom?

I considered whether to tell him the truth. He would probably find out one way or another, but why not annoy him a little? After all, he had great pleasure in doing it to me.

AVERY JAMES:

What do you care?

It's none of your business, professor.

UNKNOWN:

Oh, it sure is.

Especially if you're one of my students.

The one I like the least but still.

His student? We had crossed hundreds of lines. Lines that could ruin his career, and yet he trivialized everything that had happened.

AVERY JAMES:

The least?

*Sounded quite different when you whispered my name in your
bed over and over again.*

UNKNOWN:

Don't flatter yourself.

Besides, whoever that is, he isn't good enough for you.

Like he knew who was good enough for me.

AVERY JAMES:

He is a gentleman.

UNKNOWN:

And that's the problem.

You don't like gentlemen, Avery.

He acted as if he had known me all my life and I hated that behavior. He didn't know who I was, no, he had only seen a fraction of me.

I exhaled slowly and typed a response.

AVERY JAMES:

And what do I like, professor?

UNKNOWN:

*You like danger. You like being fucked like a whore but
worshipped like a goddess.*

I stared at the display in disbelief, shocked by his sudden change of tone. Mr. Preston was causing me more and more whiplash with each conversation we had.

I wanted to respond something mean, wanted to tell him to piss off, and yet I found myself imagining what it would feel like to lie under him while he was thrusting into me.

AVERY JAMES:

Fucked like a whore by you?

UNKNOWN:

Exactly.

*If I could, I would take you on my desk so everyone could see
that you're off limits.*

Especially your little friend.

I allowed myself to indulge in these words, in my forbidden thoughts, in his threats that would never lead to anything. He played with me, had his fun in confusing me, and I was tired of it.

It was my turn to mess with him.

AVERY JAMES:

And if I want him to touch me?

UNKNOWN:

Then I hope you think of me when he fucks you.

AVERY JAMES:

If you're a good boy, I let you watch. I bet you're hard just by thinking of me, imagining it was you who moves inside me.

I hoped that had left enough impression.

UNKNOWN:

Fuck, Avery.

Stop it.

Bingo. He was all worked up.

AVERY JAMES:

Are you hard right now, professor?

UNKNOWN:

Maybe. You can come and see for yourself.

AVERY JAMES:

Can't, I have a date in a few minutes. Bye.

With a big grin on my face, I left the chat and packed my bag.

I had taken control, had a hold on Mr. Preston—at least for a few sentences.

It was late afternoon when I met Noah outside the gates of the academy. He looked really nice in his black jeans, the light gray hoodie, and the dark thin jacket that was more for the spring time.

Now that I couldn't get out when I wanted, the steps to freedom felt much more tempting.

"Ready?" he asked as he handed me a second helmet.

I stared at the monster beside him, a motorcycle, as dark as a starless night. Impressed, I nodded, walked around the bike and inspected it up close.

A different kind of art and yet just as beautiful. "Let's go then, I'm starving." I put my helmet on and swung behind him, the place warm from the seat heater. I had never ridden with anyone before, which only fueled my nervousness. Letting someone else take the wheel was scary. Losing control made me panic.

As Noah slowly sped up, I let out a shrill squeal that made him laugh. I playfully punched his biceps and wrapped my arms tighter around him.

We sped through the gloaming, the academy left long behind. A narrow road stretched out before us, with nothing but tall trees to the left and right, catching the sun's last rays and darkening the path.

The air was fresh and mossy, calling up memories of my night in the woods with Mr. Preston.

“Shouldn’t you slow down a little?” I asked against the whipping wind. His chest vibrated before he answered.

“You’ve never been safer. My reflexes are off the charts, Avery.” I gritted my teeth and stifled another comment, just hoping we would arrive soon.

Noah took a sharp left turn, and I clawed tighter around his defined belly, my fingers already so stiff they’d probably twitch all night.

“Are you okay?” he asked, concerned. I shook my head, helmet heavy.

“Speed scares me,” I admitted tersely, and he eased off the gas, making me relax a little.

My date mumbled an apology, his words muffled by the wind.

“We’ll be there soon.” I exhaled in relief. We’d spent far too long on the bike already, and I desperately needed solid ground under my feet.

In my mind, I counted to a thousand and back again, trying to distract myself from this situation. I lost myself in my thoughts, my imagination, thinking of a time long since gone, a time when I danced on the tables of taverns. An amusing fairy tale to distract me from the passing firs.

Before more images could flash before my mind’s eye, Noah stopped abruptly, and I crashed against his back.

He helped me take off my helmet, and I looked around, taking in my surroundings. The city center was more like a ghost town, with hardly any people on the streets.

It had something of a horror movie about it, made you shudder. Yet a certain melancholy embraced us, a melancholy that only the locals could understand.

With stiff legs, I stepped down and almost twisted my ankle at the first steps. The cold had numbed my limbs, and I tried not to let my discomfort show.

Instead, I gave my date a charming smile and followed him into the nearby pub.

The floorboards creaked under our boots. Small tables were scattered throughout the poorly lit taproom, locals playing cards and getting drunk, distracting themselves from the desolation that prevailed here.

Noah led me to one of the tables, close to a group of men fretting over the winning of their friend. I stifled a smile and settled down on the wooden bench.

“Nice here,” I assured my friend. That was no lie. This place had charm, the walls decorated with pictures, posters, or rustic metal signs of drinks.

I could imagine spending my nights here. Well, at least in the past.

“Glad you like it,” he said as he waved to a waitress. I hadn’t missed how people had reacted to us, how they had stared at us as if we were some kind of otherworldly creatures.

Just the fear of strangers, I told myself, and ordered a cocktail. One drink wouldn’t hurt.

“Why are you afraid of speed?” he asked me out of the blue. Puzzled, I looked at him, not sure why he had just come up with this topic.

“I haven’t had great experiences with fast vehicles,” I replied, pointing to the prominent scar on my face. Noah just nodded, waiting for me to add something, but I didn’t.

Talking about these things from my past was getting us nowhere. It didn’t ease my pain.

“I had a terrible accident once,” he began, and I was startled by his sudden openness. “So many people have been hurt because of me, and I fell into a deep, dark hole, stayed there for years until Leilah pulled me out.” I didn’t realize their friendship was so deep. “Then we both got sent to the academy, and we’ve been best friends ever since.” His signature-grin emerged, and I couldn’t help but stare at him, a small smile on my lips. “And Caleb? Did you guys know each other before?”

“No, I met him through Leilah. He joined at almost the same time. Long, complicated story I could never tell as well

as she would.” *Interesting*. I had already noticed that there was a lot more going on behind the facade.

“I had no idea Mr. Preston was related to her.” Noah cleared his throat and scratched the back of his neck.

“Yes, they’re very distant relatives, their shared blood long washed out. Her parents have almost no contact with the Prestons. The elite prefer to keep to themselves.” Maybe I only imagined it, but I heard an ounce of bitterness in his voice.

The redheaded waitress came with our drinks, and I looked at his glass. “I don’t feel like drinking alcohol.” I shrugged and didn’t respond.

“And do you have a girlfriend, Noah?” I asked curiously. His eyes darkened. “Or a boyfriend?” He shook his head.

“My parents are very old-fashioned. In my circles, partners are chosen by the parents. I could never get into a serious relationship with anyone. It would be doomed to fail and would only break my heart. I just hope they pick someone pretty.”

A small smile spread over his face. “And that she’s younger than fifty.” I pressed my lips together. How could he joke in such a situation? His whole life was passing by, and he was no longer in control of his future.

It was an agony I could never understand, didn’t *want* to understand.

“You deserve to be happy.” I stroked his shoulder kindly, and he nodded.

“We all deserve a lot of things and don’t get them.”

Indeed, my friend.

Slowly, I understood why he wanted to meet with me, why he sought my closeness. Not because he had grown feelings for me. No, Noah was just as lonely as I was.



AFTER TWO MORE COCKTAILS AND a contest to see who could tell the worst jokes, I realized the room was spinning, my field of vision foggy.

A nosy Avery was bad. A nosy and drunk Avery was the worst.

Noah was wolfing down a portion of fries, but my mind was already drifting in a dangerous direction.

Before I could stop myself, I blurted out, “Do you know who murdered Olivia?” He raised an eyebrow.

“Were you guys so close that you’re so pressed to find answers?” I rolled my eyes. None of them wanted to understand.

“It’s not about that. I don’t care about Olivia, per se. It’s about the act, it could just as easily have been someone else.” Me, for example. But I couldn’t bring myself to say that.

Noah couldn’t know about my suspicions yet. It would not be wise to accuse one of the faculty of such a horrific crime. If I had bad luck, I would be sent home immediately.

“But it wasn’t. Let the dead rest, Avery. Don’t get caught up in things that don’t concern you. Believe me, there have been plenty before you and it didn’t end well for them.”

Was he trying to tell me in a roundabout way to stay out of the matter, because if I didn’t, I was next?

“But that school is so strange, something isn’t right. I can feel it, I can see it.” His head shot in my direction.

“What did you see?” he asked cautiously, his voice wary and deep. It felt like he knew more than he was letting on.

“It doesn’t matter.” He didn’t let it go, urging me to say the things I wasn’t allowed to say. Leilah, Mr. Preston, Penelope’s alien relative.... How I would have loved to let Noah in on it, but he would have just looked at me like I was a freak. “We probably just have too much mold in the academy and I’m going mad.”

He took the hint and didn’t probe, but I saw that his scrutinising eyes were constantly on me.

“Where were you at the time of her death, anyway?” Oh no, that sounded like an accusation. It certainly wasn’t meant that way.

Only when I saw his amused expression did I know he hadn’t taken it negatively.

“Between Cassandra’s legs.” Noah smiled mischievously, and I couldn’t help but burst with laughter. “But seriously, many students and faculty were questioned—“

“Even Mr. Preston?” I cut him off and cursed myself at the same moment.

Very low-key, Avery.

“Wait a minute... You think our professor got his hands dirty? He’s a lot of things, but I don’t think he had anything to do with Olivia’s death.” Noah rolled his eyes but moved closer. “And please don’t make innuendos like that in public. It could cost you your head.” His words were barely a whisper.

Cost me my head? He was crazy. Of course, I couldn’t tell him about the bloodied scarf or the conversation between the principal and his ex-fiancée in which they might have talked about him. If he were to accidentally blurt something out, then we would both be in trouble. No, in a messed up way, I preferred my place at the academy.

“Let’s change the subject,” I finally begged, exhaling audibly.

“What are your plans for after the academy?” His question showed genuine interest, I could hear that.

I thought for a moment, but nothing concrete came to mind.

“My dream was to become a pianist. Well, now it remains just a dream.” He narrowed his eyes.

I curtly told Noah how it had happened, and he eyed me with that pitying look I hated so much. But I couldn’t stay mad at him. He was compassionate, was kind.

“But once you play again, you can make up for the lost time, right?” I shook my head.

“I’ll never get back to hundred percent. Then I might as well not do it.”

“That’s a very destructive way of thinking. I’m sure Mr. Preston already told you that.” I snorted.

“No, he just made me play, over and over again. He tortured me for hours until I couldn’t take it anymore.”

Just thinking about it made me feel sick. Or maybe that was just because of the cocktails.

“Perhaps you just needed that torture to find yourself again.”

I let Noah’s words run through my mind. Just as I was about to say something back, his tablet rang.

I gestured for him to pick up, and he excused himself outside. *To find yourself again....* Yes, it’s true. I had lost myself, but could a man I basically didn’t know at all, with whom I hadn’t spent any stage of my life, help me out of the darkness?

Be it out of spite or stupidity, but I pulled my tablet out of my pocket and opened our chat.

Only with difficulty could I concentrate on the keys, and it took twice as long for a message.

I pressed send and buried my face in my hands. Tomorrow, I could blame it on the alcohol.

AVERY JAMES:

I'm thinking about you.

I flinched at the sound of my tablet. He answered really fast; I hadn't expected such a quick response.

UNKNOWN:

What?

Yes, I asked myself the same thing, don't worry. I pushed a strand behind my ear and took another sip of the cocktail the waitress had brought at my request.

There was almost no alcohol in it, and I suspected Noah had something to do with it.

AVERY JAMES:

I'm a little drunk, professor.

Will you punish me?

Okay, I could have left out the last part.

UNKNOWN:

Where are you?

Because there were so many choices here, smartass.

AVERY JAMES:

I won't tell.

UNKNOWN:

I warn you, Avery.

If you don't tell me right now, you'll regret it.

Was I messed up because it turned me on? I shrugged. No, I was totally normal.

AVERY JAMES:

Always so bossy.

I like it.

UNKNOWN:

Are you always such a brat?

Did my words annoy him that much? He had already made it clear to me often enough that he would rather have me out of the academy, and yet he kept replying to my messages.

AVERY JAMES:

Yes, and you love it.

UNKNOWN:

Stop it.

No, time to take it a little further.

AVERY JAMES:

*A guy here at the bar is trying to pick me up.
He looks cute, maybe I'll go with him.*

UNKNOWN:

Stop this bullshit or I'll search every bar in a radius of 100 miles for you and drag you out myself.

Okay, he was angry, *really* angry. I imagined his face and couldn't help but giggle. I had never thought that you could get a man like him so worked up that fast.

AVERY JAMES:

I'll think of you when he fucks me.

Said the woman who had never had sex before.

UNKNOWN:

Avery...

I remembered how that word sounded on his lips, how he whispered it over and over again. It was almost as if my name was created just for him, just for his voice.

AVERY JAMES:

Say please and I won't go with him.

UNKNOWN:

Fuck it.

Please don't go with him.

An unfamiliar feeling spread through my belly. Those few words had probably cost him more than I had thought. He didn't look like the kind of person who would ask for anything. No, he took what he wanted.

AVERY JAMES:

That's how I like you, professor, begging me.

UNKNOWN:

Send me your location, I'll be on my way.

So he could ruin my platonic date with Noah? Surely not. I had no wish for him to show up and throw a tantrum.

Still, I couldn't get over the images forming in my head. He was kneeling behind me, my back against his chest. He grabbed me by the throat and thrust into me so hard it made me dizzy. Before I could stop myself, I sent the next message.

AVERY JAMES:

Will you fuck me afterwards?

UNKNOWN:

No.

I want you to be conscious while I brand you as mine.

My lips parted as I read his response twice, stunned by his boldness. *Mine?* Did he even understand the implications of this one word?

“Sorry I had to take the call,” Noah said, sitting down across from me.

Shaken, I quickly locked the screen and slapped the tablet down on the table. “Were you watching porn or something?” He frowned, and I shot him a mock glare.

“Yeah, you ruined the ending for me.” I crossed my arms and leaned back.

The taproom was almost empty by now. Outside, the moon cast bluish light on the streets and trees, adding even more mystique to the night.

“Never heard that one before.” I couldn’t hold back the laughter.

His gaze darkened again. No matter what he had talked about outside, it didn’t mean well. Something must have been going on.

“I know this is super shitty of me right now, but I’m afraid I have to leave you alone. There’s an emergency at my house.” I nodded, concerned by the sudden sternness in his soft features.

“Did something serious happen? Do you want me to come with you?” He just shook his head.

“No, I’ll be fine. The only problem is that I can’t take you back to the academy. My parents live in the opposite direction. They can get very uncomfortable if I disobey their order.” I looked at my watch and panic set in.

It was already far too late, the gates of the boarding school soon to be closed. This couldn’t be fucking real right now.

“What about the school? Aren’t you going to get in trouble?” Nervously, I tugged at the hem of my top.

“I’ll take care of that somehow. Do you know anyone who could pick you up?” I thought about it, but I could only think of one person who would dare to leave the academy at this hour—Mr. Preston.

Shit.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine, you can go.” Noah let out a sigh of relief, his shoulders no longer as tense.

With a guilty look, he finally rose and threw on the dark jacket that would barely keep him warm.

“I’m so sorry, I’ll make it up to you, I promise.” I made a dismissive hand gesture and gave him a reassuring smile.

Everything would be fine if time stopped right now. Before Noah was out the door, he turned around one more time, his hair disheveled. “And please text me as soon as you get home.”

The next moment he was gone, leaving me with a racing heart. It looked like I would see Mr. Preston tonight.

ALEXANDER

With a towel around my waist, I walked into the bedroom when my tablet vibrated on the nightstand. I knew only one person who would text me at this hour.

The moon was almost at its zenith, and I clenched my jaw at the thought of what she must have been doing tonight. She had probably just texted me to rub it in.

Avery had already made my anger boil enough for today. The first time when I had been so hard because of her messages that it almost hurt, and the second time when she had made me beg her not to fuck a guy who wasn't me.

The thoughts, the fantasies I had about her were wrong for dozens of reasons, reasons that went beyond the academic.

Still, I couldn't help but imagine what my dick would feel like in her mouth, and I cursed myself for already being rock hard just from those images.

MY TABLET VIBRATED AGAIN, and I groaned in annoyance. This girl...

AVERY JAMES:

Could you pick me up?

Professor?

I frowned. Why didn't the guy she had left with bring her back? Either the evening didn't go well, and the guy dumped her, for which I could rip his throat out, or something had happened.

I hoped it was the first option so I could take my rage out on someone.

UNKNOWN:

Send me your location. I'll come.

Another message popped up on my tablet with a map and her location. City center. Could he at least have taken her out somewhere nice?

I, for one, would have flown her out to Paris or Milan, shown her the entire world, if she only wasn't a fucking student and didn't have to do her time in our institute. And if her safety wasn't compromised in my mere presence.

Silently, I closed the door behind me and took a shortcut to the parking lots of the faculty. It was silent around me, only the owls' singing a constant companion of my steps.

My car came into view, almost invisible thanks to the color and tinted windows. I started the engine, just hoping that no one would come and check what's going on. The late hour urged me to hurry as I texted Avery that I was leaving now. Another message went out to Leilah.

ALEXANDER PRESTON:

Cover for Avery. She's coming soon.

LEILAH AZIZ:

I was planning to, duh.

I rolled my eyes and slipped the tablet back into my pocket. If we were lucky, no one would notice her absence. If we were unlucky, I would take the fall for it, lie and say I kidnapped her or some bullshit.



Avery

I stared impatiently at my watch, my tablet's battery almost dead. I hadn't failed to notice how grimly the last of the drunken guests looked at me, and I almost went up to one and banged his head against the damn bar.

The alcohol in my system had already faded, and I blamed it on the sudden adrenaline rush that had jolted me awake.

The cute waitress came to my table and cleared the empty glasses.

"We're closing in ten minutes, sweetie." I pressed my lips together. It was obvious they were going to kick me out soon. "How much do I owe you?" I asked as I reached for my wallet.

"Oh, your friend already paid for everything." I narrowed my eyes.

After Noah left, I had another drink to kill the time. “He had the rest written on his list, don’t worry,” she added when she saw my puzzled expression.

Alright. I gave her one last smile before rising and putting on my jacket. My ass ached from sitting so long on the hard wooden bench, and I winced at the sudden pain in my lower back.

My muffled footsteps echoed in the pub as I made my way back. None of the old men uttered a stupid line, and I was grateful for the missed confrontation. Today was a bad day to get on my nerves.

The midnight air greeted me in an icy embrace, drawing goosebumps across my body. Shit, it smelled like rain. Just what I needed right now.

The streets were barely lit, gaunt branches in the distance reminding me of claws from the monsters we’d faced in our nightmares. I looked at the clock on the tablet display again and slumped my shoulders. There was no way I would arrive on time.

I curled my hands into fists in my pockets and set off, always following the road from which we had come. The wind whipped my hair into my face and the draft made the woods sing. With my jaw clenched, I had to admit that the place scared me, but I kept walking, wanting to save time by walking in Mr. Prestons direction. I knew it was a shitty idea, but I could contribute at least this small part.

A few minutes passed in which I hummed to myself to block out the agonizing cold, but it didn’t help. It had already wormed its way into my marrow, taken possession of my body.

Strange and yet so real images appeared before my mind’s eye. After a concert, I must have been thirty, I was walking along lonely alleys, a handsome young man at my side. I didn’t see his face, but his voice felt familiar—it sounded like home, like eternity.

A car came towards me, and I hoped it was my professor. The two lights illuminated my body, but the driver did not stop, did not ask if I was alright. Maybe it was better that way. I let out an annoyed sigh and kept walking.

Barely a few minutes later, thunder sounded, making me tremble. No, please don't. Before I had finished the thought, the first raindrops were already pelting me. It would be a miracle if I didn't catch pneumonia.

Mr. Preston will be here soon, I kept telling myself, fighting the rain that soaked me down to my socks. Fucking Noah owed me, that was for sure.



Alexander

I raced along the road, barely able to get a proper look because of the heavy rain. Damn, she had to be freezing.

With that thought, I hit the gas harder, letting my worry drive me. The city center was only a few minutes away, but it felt like hours, days.

And there... On the side of the road, almost swallowed by the shadows of the surrounding trees, she walked, arms wrapped around herself, eyes glued to the ground. She didn't look up when I came closer, trembling all over. Oh, holy soul...

With my hands clawed to the steering wheel, I took a sharp U-turn and came to a stop next to her. Avery took a few steps back, surely thinking I would do something bad to her. I rolled down the window.

“Step in already, or do you need a written invitation?” Water streamed down her face and her jeans stuck to her thighs like a perfectly fitting glove, made just for her.

The little monster opened the door, almost slipped, but managed to hold on at just the right moment.

“You came,” she replied tightly. Of course I had come; what a stupid comment.

She slammed the door shut, and I wasted no time racing back to the academy.

“What were you doing out here by yourself? You could have just waited for me there.” I couldn’t help the snarky undertone.

“T-the pub was closing soon, and I wanted to save time by m-meeting you halfway.” I rolled my eyes.

As if that bit of saved time had mattered much. She hadn’t gotten very far.

Her teeth were chattering, and I reached into the back seat for a thin blanket I always kept in the car. It wouldn’t keep her warm, but it could suck some of the water off.

“Thanks,” she mumbled, wrapping herself in the piece of fabric. We spent some time in silence, her mind probably all over the place.

I turned the seat heater up and watched her gradually relax. Her scent, so alluring and unmistakable, claimed the air.

God, how I had missed that scent. Avery’s scent was my muse, my downfall and my salvation. I could have spent decades lying next to her and smelling her hair.

To fill the silence, I turned up the radio, choosing a radio station with classical music. A song, old and tragic, played and her eyes lingered on me.

“That’s one of my favorites,” she said, barely audible.

“I know.”



Avery

Mr. Preston seemed particularly pissed off today, and I didn’t know what I must have done to draw his wrath on me again.

Yes, I had probably gotten him out of bed, but he could have said no.

I stared nervously at the dashboard, the speed indicator going higher and higher. My heart was pounding, my chest tightening.

This fear was irrational, and I knew I was projecting my trauma onto this situation, but I couldn't do anything about my dark thoughts. At every turn, I winced until I couldn't take it anymore.

"Slow down," I yelled. I shut my eyes, not wanting to raise my voice. "Please."

Without another word, he took his foot off the gas until we came to a speed that didn't drive me mad.

"I'm sorry, I forgot." His voice seemed softer; gone was the bitterness in it. Mr. Preston didn't try to make conversation, let the music do the talking. But I wanted to explain myself.

"There was an emergency at Noah's house, and he had to leave. I'm sorry if I caused you any trouble."

"Stop apologizing. There's no need for that." I cleared my throat.

"Did you have a nice evening?" What the hell, Avery? Why did you ask that?

"I bet you had a better one," he returned curtly.

Yeah, I had theorized if you could be a murderer, that was pretty fun.

"Are you going to be at the Halloween party too?" I finally asked, trying to lighten the mood.

"No, certainly not."

I imagined what he would look like in a costume. Probably just as good as he did now, with his curly black hair and his leather jacket that was a little too tight around his biceps.

"I'm going. I bet you'd have fun there. Ms. Arden could keep you company." That sounded way too weird coming out

of my mouth. I'd better shut up.

"You're thinking about me and Ms. Arden?" His eyes landed on me as he raised an eyebrow.

"Well, I heard you two were...engaged, and I doubt you broke up on bad terms." At least their conversation had sounded friendly back in the office. Maybe even more than that?

He exhaled in annoyance.

"Cut the bullshit, Avery. I don't love her, if that's what you're hinting at. And no, she doesn't love me either. Can we drop this subject now?"

I brushed a few wet strands out of my face and nodded. Good plan.

"Just wanted to make conversation. Do you like being a professor?" Because he didn't really act like it.

"No. I'm just here because of my parents." That explained a lot. "They're very difficult, take more than they give, and yet I can't say no."

"Why not?" Mr. Preston didn't look like the type of man who would put up with anything.

"I just can't," he returned curtly.

"If you don't like being a professor, then you certainly don't like students, do you?"

Gosh, that sounded really wrong. I actually meant to know if he hated students and therefore might have had a motive. Instead, it sounded like I wanted to know if he was interested in me. Damn, Avery shut the fuck up.

"I don't like the students either." A crooked smile spread across his face, and I almost slapped myself for the sudden stab in the heart I felt at his words. "But some I dislike less."

"Yeah, some professors I dislike less too," I said, looking out the window so he wouldn't see my smile.

"Why did you set the house on fire, Avery?" he asked out of nowhere. My head shot to the side, surprised at the sudden

change of subject.

“Does it make any difference if I tell you?” The air felt much heavier than usual.

“No,” he finally admitted. “But I’d still like to know.”

I took a deep breath and exhaled, debating what I could and couldn’t tell him. If he told anyone, my year here would be for nothing.

“Do you swear it will stay between us?” My tone was dead serious, the cheerfulness in it gone.

“On my soul.” A strange way to swear, but from his mouth it sounded more sincere than all the oaths put together. Alright...

“You must have read my testimony.” He nodded. “It wasn’t the whole truth. Yes, I had enjoyed burning that house down. I really did. But not because I’m a monster. I did it for Mia, my neighbor’s little daughter. Her mother was Satan incarnate and had done horrible things to her. I was her only friend, so she confided to me what was happening under the condition not to tell anybody. She was traumatized, afraid, and I saw no way out. My anonymous reports to the police had done nothing. No, they had made everything worse. Mia has no other relatives who could take care of her. I just wanted it to make it stop, you know?”

“So you burned the house down so they could move somewhere else? Further away from you?” I shook my head.

“No. I wanted to hurt her mother badly, so she couldn’t take care of Mia for a long time. Watching her suffer was a bonus. The satisfaction I got will feed my spirit for a lifetime. Anyway, a foster family would take better care of her. God, anyone would take better care of her than that demon.”

“And what happens after that?” He sounded skeptical, nothing conveying what was going on inside of him as he took in my words.

“I want my father to adopt her. For that, I have to tell him the whole story, which is hard over the phone. Now it’s not the time. Not until I know Mia is safe, far away from her mother.”

I shifted in my seat. “And if he doesn’t want to, and I’m out of here, I’ll go to work, earn my money somehow. Then I’ll do it in his place.”

I thought about how anxiously she had knocked on our door while my father was at work. She was getting almost nothing to eat, her body covered in bruises. Sometimes I would sneak out and put candy on her windowsill.

My actions, however, did little to ease her suffering. I could still remember when we sat on my porch, and I braided her hair. That late spring, she had told me for the first time what was being done to her.

A shiver went through me as I imagined her eyes as she begged me to keep it to myself. At that moment, I realized what I had to do.

“So you sacrificed your future for the small chance that she would be better off somewhere else?”

“Yes,” I answered without hesitation. “And I would do it all over again.” Mr. Preston nodded, lost in thought.

“Of course you would,” he said more to himself, and I couldn’t make sense of his words. “You have a good heart.”

“I’m sure yours is the same. You just don’t show it.”

Perhaps I had gone too far with that statement. I didn’t know him, but something, maybe a gut feeling, told me we were more alike than I had thought.

“If people saw it, they’d count on it.” I snorted.

“So you don’t want people counting on you?”

“No,” he replied quietly. “Someone counted on me once. And I let that person down.”

Was he talking about a woman, about a past lover? I knew jealousy was inappropriate, but I couldn’t help feeling it. “Every few years we run into each other by chance, but it’s not like before.” For the first time since my confession, he turned his gaze back on me, the blue in his eyes darker, wilder, like a stormy ocean. So much sorrow lay in them, and yet they also bore longing and hope. “We’re here.”

The gates to the academy opened, a fateful invitation.

We pulled into the empty parking lot, barely a handful of cars around. It was almost pitch dark. Only a few windows spent their golden light but could not illuminate the way. Even the moon did not want to show itself. The thunders that sporadically decorated the night sky did nothing to calm my pounding heart.

Something in the way he sat, the way he looked, changed.

“Have you ever loved anyone, professor?” I blurted out.

I didn’t know why I had spoken those words. It was almost as if his soul had forced me to say what I was thinking. A smile crossed his lips, rough and heart-wrenching.

“Yes. Every time we found each other again, I loved her even more.” I swallowed. That revelation hurt me more than I wanted to admit.

“Why aren’t you together?” I continued to ask, the engine long since turned off.

“Who says we’re not?”

Something flashed in his eyes, a certain challenge, as if I should know how to play this game, as if he would demand it of me and then be disappointed when I didn’t get the rules.

“I see her absence in your eyes.”

He came closer, his scent even more intense.

“She’s not part of my present, and she certainly won’t be part of my future. Fate made sure of that, and I’ve come to

terms with it.” No, you haven’t, I wanted to retort, but didn’t want to cause him more pain. He was already consumed with regret.

I moved a little toward him, indulging in the feeling of intimacy, in the darkness where we could tell each other our secrets.

“I’m worried about you,” I whispered, and he gave me a questioning look. “That you’ll never be happy.”

He snorted barely audibly and shook his head.

“I’m happy right now.” I blinked, stunned by his words that danced around my heart like rusty knives, threatening to tear it apart.

He took my chin between his thumb and finger, skin warm in contrast to mine. A silent shudder spread through my body.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, it’s killing me.” Before I could realize, he pulled my face to his, eyes like those of a starving man.

A sharp pain shot through my head, and I cried out. It was almost like someone was shoving scorching nails into my brain.

Images, forgotten and yet forever burned into my memory, surfaced before my mind’s eye.

I was standing in a chapel, wearing a white silk nightgown, the altar lit only by a few candles. A tall man stood next to me and held my hand. At first, I only saw his robe, which was as if from another time, probably meant for sleeping too.

The sweet aftertaste of the forbidden lingered in the air; it was almost as if we had met here in secret, hidden from the outside world.

Anticipation took hold of my body, bliss in my heart. A priest stepped in front of us, speaking words I did not understand.

Even the biting cold around my bare feet did not bother me. There was only the smell of myrrh, the warm body next to me and my wildly pounding heart.

The priest finished his prayer and withdrew, giving us space for a kiss. The man with the irresistible scent turned to me, took my chin between his thumb and finger, and....

My heart skipped a beat as I stared into Alexander Preston's beautiful eyes.

"What's wrong?" a deep voice sounded, shaking me out of my trance. I looked around, was back in the darkened car.

"Nothing," I assured him. "I just have a headache. They've been getting worse lately." He looked at me, eyes narrowed.

"Then let's go." Mr. Preston's stony expression returned, and I bit the inside of my cheek to keep myself from begging him to stay in the car a little longer.

He stepped outside, and I did the same, the merciless rain already soaking my clothes once more. The wind had died down in this part of the area and didn't make me feel as cold as I had on my way home.

I made it to the hood, took another moment to calm down, and massaged my temples to dispel the illusions. My professor came to my side, his steps prideful and elegant.

"Are you sure you're alright?"

"Yeah, it's just...do you hallucinate sometimes?" Okay, I really sounded like a crazy person right now. I wish I'd kept my mouth shut.

He took one step closer, then two, until he was standing in front of me. Despite the cold, I felt the heat of his body as if he were lying on top of me.

To create some space between us, I stepped back but didn't get far, my ass already pressed against the hood.

"No. What are these...hallucinations showing you?" he asked, not mockingly or derogatorily, but out of sheer curiosity.

"You can't really call them hallucinations, I don't know. They're like memories I had never created." Or maybe it was just that weirdo Flavian around, making fun of my suffering. Of course, I didn't tell my professor this detail.

“What memories exactly?” he urged, his body dangerously close to mine.

He towered over me, and I glanced up, looking into the familiar yet strange face that haunted me.

“It’s not important.” I wanted to step away from him, back into the academy, but he caged me in, one arm to my right, one to my left.

“Tell me.” He took a deep breath. “Please.” All I had to do was lean forward a little, lift my head, and our lips would have touched.

“Memories of *us*,” I breathed. He closed his eyes, trying to hide from me what it looked like inside of him. I wonder what he thought of me now. “I’m not crazy, I swear.” And I certainly didn’t want to call these illusions memories.

He shook his head and opened his eyes. I couldn’t interpret the emotions that were playing out in them. Anger? Disappointment? Desire?

Without warning, his lips crushed to mine. One hand was on my lower back, pressing me against his body. The other caressed my jaw.

He murmured something unintelligible between our kisses, but I couldn’t focus on anything but his tongue in my mouth.

There was nothing loving, nothing tender about this kiss. It was ravenous, feeding on insatiable desire.

I bit his lower lip and he let his fingers slide under my soaked top, clawing into my flesh for fear I would run away.

I leaned back, my spine pressed against the car, and he bent over me, shielding my body from the rain.

My fingertips traced the contours of his chest, his arms, his belly, wanting to feel him everywhere. What we were doing right now wasn’t enough to satisfy my hunger.

“Touch me,” I brought out between frantic breaths, and he obeyed, massaging my stiff nipples and parting my thighs with his knee.

His mouth moved to my throat, sucking on the sensitive spot above my pulse.

“Alexander,” I moaned. “More.” With one deft movement, he unbuttoned my jeans, and I whimpered as his cold fingers slid under my panties.

Nervously, I glanced to my right, wanting to see if people were watching.

“No one comes here, not at this hour.” He nipped at my bottom lip as his finger thrust into me.

My hips buckled up when my professor pushed another finger inside me and worked them in and out, slowly at first and then with a rhythm I barely could take any longer.

I exposed my throat to him, let him mark me, claim me. Tonight, I was his, and he was mine.

Alexander licked over my nipples, aching with desire, and bit into my skin until it almost hurt. I enjoyed the pain, also enjoyed his fingers, which he had buried knuckles deep inside me.

I didn't care what circumstances had brought us here, what would happen tomorrow. I knew only one thing: I needed him, had to feel him in all kinds of ways.

“Please.” I curled one hand into his hair and pulled his mouth back to mine, claiming his lips.

“Please what?” he asked, smirking against my mouth.

“Please fuck me. Now.” I didn't care if the whole school was watching as long as I could feel him deep inside me.

“Just because you begged, love.”

Alexander let go of me and I heard how fabric tore, felt the cold and the rain between my legs. Oh God, he had ripped my jeans in two.

He took off his leather jacket and carelessly dropped it onto the dirty ground, leaving him with only a loose t-shirt.

He paused briefly, eyeing me from top to bottom, as if he wanted to burn this sight into his memory.

His pitch-black hair stuck to his temples, clothes soaked through, so that I could trace the contours of his body with my eyes. How I would have loved to have him naked under me right now.

His eyes were still on me, on my breasts and between my legs, while he unbuttoned his jeans, freeing his length.

I licked my lips, wondering if he would even fit inside me. But my hunger for Alexander took over, and I bucked up my hips, urging him to hurry.

“Are you sure you want to cross this line?”

“Yes,” I breathed. I had never been so certain of anything in my life before—I wanted to give him, us, this moment.

He lifted me further up, and I hooked my legs around his waist, trembling from the cold or anticipation.

Alexander positioned his tip at my entrance. Our eyes met as he slammed into me with one powerful thrust.

I couldn't help a whimper, my nails digging hard into his skin and drawing blood. His size widened me, and I felt a sharp pain in my lower belly.

Damn, it hurt so bad I didn't think I could ever enjoy it. Agonizingly slow, he pulled out, only to push himself harder into me. The stabbing pain didn't stop, no, it only got worse.

My professor noticed my tortured expression and changed the pace, but I didn't want him to stop. No, my body was screaming for him, for his touch.

I buried my face in the crook of his neck and matched his thrusts, relaxing around the width of his cock until the pain gave way to something much more intense.

“That's it, relax, I'll take care of you,” he whispered against my hair, and I nodded, letting him take the lead.

Alexander set up a deep, brutal rhythm, making me take every inch of him—and finally enjoying it.

My whimpering was replaced by hoarse moans. His length pressed on the right place, quickly, mercilessly gliding over

the spot that almost pushed me over the edge. My lips found his, our kisses a promise never to be made.



Alexander

I LOVE HER, I love her, I love her so much.

Feeling Avery around my dick was the most intense moment since our wedding night when we snuck out and vowed to always search for each other no matter where the wind carried us.

And she slowly started to remember, which only broke my heart even more. I couldn't help but lower my head, take her nipple between my teeth and bite. I knew exactly what she liked, knew all her desires as if they were my own.

By now I was more monster than man, driven by the primal instinct to possess her, to brand her as mine, to bury myself completely inside of her.

She was so wet, so tight, so perfectly made for me. Her mouth fell open, and she threw her head back, looking up at the stars. But not even they could help her now. With each of my thrusts, with each of her moans, and with each of our kisses, we sealed our fate.

Avery's movements became jerkier, her muscles tightening around my dick until she let out an earth shattering scream that crept up to my very marrow.

I gave her no time to relax, thrusting into her as if feeling her warmth for the last time. My breath quickened and I could no longer hold back, having waited far too long for this moment.

With a growl of pure ecstasy, I burst into a thousand pieces.



Avery

I WINCED as he pulled out of me and gently lowered me back down. My gaze wandered between his legs, to the smear of blood.

Something in his face changed as he realized what that meant. Alexander took my face between his hands and kissed me, our touch as delicate as a feather.

I felt his seed running down my inner thigh and I swear it turned me on even more. Alexander had clawed his way into my brain and claimed my soul with his addictive venom. I let him, was already doomed.

He let go of me and I tried to cover up, to protect myself from the heavy rain that was still pouring down on us.

“Here, put this on.” He dug out an old pair of sweatpants from his trunk and I disappeared into the backseat of his car to get rid of the wet piece of fabric.

I was so sore that I cringed with every step, but I didn’t want to let my pain show.

A little drier, I stepped out of his spacious car, and we made our way back to the school in silence. I didn’t dare say anything, for fear of ruining the moment or scaring him off.

Our cold skin was met by comforting warmth, the hallways narrow and dark. It seemed like an eternity that we were walking straight ahead, and my shaking had slowly subsided.

Alexander’s fingers brushed mine, a reminder that he was here with me. I shuddered at the innocent touch, and little flashes ran through my arm up to my chest. He intertwined his pinky with mine, and it felt like the safest anchor in the world.

I had called in sick for the first half of the day. For one thing, I was far too overtired, and for another, I needed to sort out my thoughts before I met Mr. Preston.

I had had sex with a professor, with a man I barely knew, and yet there was this connection I couldn't describe. It went beyond the physical, beyond the romantic. No, it was something else.

Leilah flicked me in the face and joined me at the table in the cafeteria. She had been sound asleep on Friday night, had built a sort of dummy out of several cushions before I returned, and had covered it up so that it looked like I was sleeping. After the heart attack, I almost pissed myself laughing.

We hadn't talked about that night, and she didn't pressure me to tell her details, so I didn't bring up the subject. It would be better for her if she didn't know.

"What are you listening to?" she asked, staring at my display.

"Emma, a singer from New Orleans. I love her music, listen," I took out one headphone and handed it to her.

The blonde with the wild hair used to sing at *Apollo's Muse* every now and then, and I promised myself to visit this bar sometime if I was ever in that city.

"Her voice is amazing," my roommate quipped, zooming in to get a closer look at the singer. "And she's hot." I rolled

my eyes and set the tablet aside.

“The Halloween party is coming up soon. I’ve already thought about the perfect costumes. Well, they don’t match, but it’s going to look sexy. That’s the most important part anyway,” she explained while stealing my fries. I could well imagine what ideas she had looking at the dresses in her closet.

A big grin came over my face. Yes, the evening would be perfect.

“You look different somehow,” she added, and I narrowed my eyes. Different? Oh God, did I look like I’d fucked my professor in the parking lot? “Calm down, Avery. Your face just looks happier.” Leilah gave me a sideways glance that made me suspect she already knew, but was waiting for my first move. Not that I could ever tell her. Too much was at stake.

I was about to say something back when the melodic ringing called for us to go to class.

We pushed past gossiping students, greeting some of them on the way to the classroom. I had made acquaintances with some of them, even texted with a couple of girls. However, most were keeping to themselves and just doing their time as I was.

“Go ahead and save me a seat. I’m going to the bathroom,” I said to Leilah before turning in and disappearing to the restrooms.

Every step made the uncomfortable feeling between my legs flare up. But I also enjoyed it because it was a reminder of last night, when Mr. Preston had mercilessly thrust into me until I thought I’d pass out. I clenched my thighs, sweet warmth already spreading through my lower abdomen.

My steps slowed as I noticed a lovely voice at the next turn—Penelope Arden. I was sure she was on the phone, so I stopped and leaned against the stone wall, straining my ears.

“Of course he’s not a little kid anymore,” she hissed, which sounded unnatural for her. “It’s her own fault. She

shouldn't have provoked him in the classroom. This girl was disrespectful and you know how quickly he loses his temper." A pause arose in which I did not hear what the other person on the phone was saying. "He's certainly not risking his future for a mere mortal. Our parents would never let that happen." *Mortal?*

Penelope's voice grew quieter, more threatening. "And if you believe your words can hurt him, you're dumber than you think. Oh, you don't know what I'm capable of doing for the people I love." With an annoyed snort, she hung up, the click of high heels on marble growing louder.

She was coming towards me, and I couldn't walk away. It would have been far too obvious. *Shit*. Why had I stayed? This conversation had only worsened my apprehension.

It was obvious she was talking about Mr. Preston. The bitter truth set in, etching its way into my heart—had I slept with a murderer? No, it couldn't be. My professor wasn't a bloodthirsty monster. The unnerving sound came closer, and I dug my tablet out of my pocket. Before Ms. Arden could turn the corner, I pressed play.

"Oh God, kid, you scared me," she said with a hand over her heart. I put down the headphones and looked at her devoutly.

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear you." I held up my tablet apologetically, Emma's song in the background.

Penelope smoothed her knee-length skirt and cleared her throat.

"It's okay, now go to the classroom." I pressed my lips together.

Technically, I still wanted to go take a piss, but looking at Penelope's face, I'd rather not argue with her. With a quick nod, I said goodbye and headed back in the direction I came from.

Fucking Mr. Preston. Had he just been playing with me? I should have listened to my gut, should have stayed out of his way.

Now all I wanted to do was crawl into my room and scrub every inch of me with boiling water. Those hands, hands that had killed Olivia, had touched every part of my body. And I had let him, knowing full well that he was a suspect, even after finding the scarf. Everything just because I had felt a certain pull between us. I had let him seduce me, had given myself to him. What did it make of me? Was I as fucked up as he was?

My head spun, the tightness in my chest almost unbearable. The hardest part of this whole thing was that I couldn't let it show. I couldn't let my professor suspect anything, couldn't let him know what Ms. Arden had just confirmed to me.

Who knows what would happen to me once he saw me as a thorn in his side? Would he get rid of me like he had gotten rid of Olivia? No...or would he?

The bell rang again, making even the last students in the hallways hurry.

Heart pounding, I stepped into the classroom and stared straight into Mr. Preston's annoyed face. Nothing in his expression changed as he eyed me from top to bottom.

I didn't give him a chance to stare at me any longer, and moved to the empty seat next to Leilah, who regarded me skeptically.

"What's wrong with you?" she whispered, and I shook my head.

"I'm not feeling so well. I should have stayed in bed." Before she could say anything back, my professor's irritated voice sounded.

"Shut the fuck up, Ms. James. If I hear one more word, you are excluded from the Halloween party. And I'm sure how eager you are to finally dress up like a cheap hooker." A diabolical smile came across his lips, and my mouth fell open.

Fellow students started giggling, and I would have loved to punch him in his arrogant face. It was still a mystery to me that the faculty could talk to us like that. But then again, what was normal in this school?



CALEB AND LEILAH had just said goodbye to me when my tablet vibrated. I pulled it out, knowing who had texted me before I read the name *Unknown*.

UNKNOWN:

Don't think the tutoring session is off.

I debated whether I should just ignore him. He wouldn't have the audacity to drag me out of my room, right? No, too risky.

AVERY JAMES:

I will be there.

With a straight back and a stern expression, I made my way into the lion's den. Although I was not a good liar, I still could try not to appear like a frightened puppy.

The door to his office was open, and I entered. Mr. Preston didn't look up at me as I sat down in the armchair and got out my homework. I hadn't done it on purpose so that I would have something to work on today.

We spent some time in silence and I strictly kept myself from making conversation. But after I finished the first few math exercises, he turned his attention to me.

"You are so quiet today. Usually, you talk a mile a minute." I swallowed but didn't reply. "Are you alright? You know, after yesterday," he asked more quietly, as if anyone could hear us. I paused in my movement, caught off guard by this question.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I returned curtly, not looking up from the sheet of paper.

"Then what the fuck is going on with you?" he blurted out. For the first time, I lifted my gaze and looked into his strained face. "Did I hurt you, Avery?" My lips parted at the softness with which he uttered the question.

"No, Professor." He raised an eyebrow. I looked over my shoulder at the open door and prayed he wouldn't close it.

My performance was abysmally poor, and I just hoped this day would be over soon.

Mr. Preston rose from his chair, walked around his polished desk, and stopped behind me.

“I smell the fear on you, little brat. Tell me, are you afraid of me?” I didn’t dare look up; my eyes would betray me.

Ever since I had stepped into that small, dusty room, my body had been all-armed. I could do nothing about my pounding heart. The fear of the unknown was just too strong. Ms. Arden’s phone call today and the resulting new information had given me the rest. The first conversation between her and the principal had made me wonder. After the scarf incident, I should have pulled the emergency brake, and now I was knee-deep in shit for ignoring all the red flags.

He leaned down, his lips almost touching my ear. “Are you afraid of me?” His warm breath tickled my skin, and I shivered.

“N-no.” Even I heard the lie. His rough hand encircled my throat, but he didn’t squeeze, not yet.

“And now?” My pulse hammered against his fingertips, betraying me.

“No,” I answered more firmly, making him tighten his grip below my jaw.

Mr. Preston’s other hand ran over my breasts, drawing fire on my skin. I cursed my body for the reaction it had to his touch.

My nipples stiffened, poking against my bralette and the white blouse. He ran his thumb over the sensitive spot, eliciting a moan from me.

I felt his vibrating chest pressed against my back, a deep, menacing chuckle coming over his lips. He was the hunter, and I was the prey.

My professor caressed my belly down to my upper thighs.

“Spread your legs, I want to see how wet fear makes you.”

I obeyed.

“Good girl.” His fingers slipped under my skirt, and with one swift movement, he ripped my black nylon stockings.

He pushed my panties aside, and I inhaled sharply as he slid his middle finger inside me. All my resolutions had vanished when he started moving it in and out at an agonizingly slow pace.

Oh God, this was not supposed to happen. But why did it feel so good? It was wrong to think like that, so wrong.

“Fuck Avery, so scared and wet.” He removed his hand and disappointment rippled through my messed up brain. “See for yourself.”

The finger that had just massaged me from the inside lovingly stroked my bottom lip, and I felt my wetness trickle down to my chin. That was one of the hottest moments of my life.

I laid my head back and looked up at him while licking over my lip, his eyes bright with desire.

“Do you want a taste, professor?”

He didn't let me ask him twice, dropped his head and claimed my mouth. His kiss was ravenous, nothing tender about it. Mr. Preston's grip on my throat tightened, and a flash of adrenaline rippled through my body. What I was doing here was so wrong, yet it felt so right.

His fingers found my entrance again, and I leaned into his touch as he kissed up and down my throat.

“Tell me, why are you afraid of me?” I didn't reply, just lost in the touch of the killer behind me.

I didn't know if my heart was hammering from the certainty that he could snap my neck at any moment or from the orgasm that was building.

His movements slowed until they eventually stopped for good, and I grabbed his hand so he couldn't pull away.

I needed this sweet release, needed it from *him*. Mr. Preston couldn't stop, so I took control and moved his fingers in and out, fucking myself with his help.

"Dirty little brat, look at you, using me." He let me though, curling his fingers and pressing on that spot that made me whimper.

"I'm asking for the last time, why are you afraid of me?" he whispered into my ear. "I'll stop if you don't answer."

I swallowed, my mouth suddenly way too dry.

"I know what you've done," I rasped. He froze for a moment before continuing his kisses.

"I've done a lot of things. Go on." His voice was deeper, more threatening.

I didn't want to say it, not here when we were alone. But I had no choice. If I sealed my fate now, at least it would be with his fingers inside of me.

"You killed Olivia."

My professor laughed out loud, and I felt the tension leaving him.

"So that's what you think, is it?" I nodded as his fingers took over, more firmly now.

"Penelope and the principal talked about it, then the conversation in your office and..." I paused, clutching the leather of the chair, unable to hold back a moan. "And Olivia's scarf was in one of your drawers." A chuckle escaped his lips.

"You went through my stuff?" He clicked his tongue. "Maybe I should punish you, teach you not to touch things that aren't yours." Mr. Preston bit my shoulder so hard it hurt.

"But you're touching me right now." I arched toward his hand, wanting more.

"That's right, because you're mine. I'm the only one who gets to touch you." A shiver ran down my spine. *Because you're mine...*

In one smooth motion, he was in front of me, yanking me up, and I wrapped my legs around his hips, his hard dick pressing against my soaked panties.

The door was wide open, so anyone could rush in at any time.

I landed on his desk, and he positioned himself between my legs.

“So you killed her?” I wanted to know, needed to hear it from him, but instead he unbuttoned his black slacks and my eyes widened.

His dick was bigger than I remembered, which was probably because this room was better lit.

With a diabolical smile, he moved the tip to my entrance and looked me in the eye as he thrust hard into me. I hissed at the sudden pain that ran through me while he impaled me mercilessly.

“Would you still have let me fuck you, even if it had been true?” Alexander asked. “Tell me, Avie, are you so fucked up that you let a killer make you come?”

He grabbed me by the cheeks and forced me to look at him, his expression a mix of amusement and endless craving. With each thrust, he pushed deeper. “Say it.” His thumb moved to my clit, and I couldn’t take it anymore.

“Yes.”

Alexander’s lips found mine. Raw, dangerous emotions echoed through his frantic kisses.

“I know.”



Alexander

This little monster really thought that I was responsible for the death of her classmate. Well, maybe I was, but not in the way she thought. I had enough blood on my hands, but not Olivia’s.

My victims were mostly men who had done some messed up shit. They deserved to die.

I got ten times harder when she said she would have let me have her anyway—my wicked girl. I smiled against her mouth, stifling her moans so no one could hear us through the open door.

Greedy, she tangled her fingers in my hair, pulling me closer to her body.

Her muscles squeezed my dick, and I had to keep myself from coming right then and there.

I hadn't thought she was still a virgin back in that parking lot. If I had known, I wouldn't have gone that far. Okay, that was a lie, but still I would've preferred to prepare something nice for her, flowers and candles and shit. She deserved more than a quick fuck on the hood of my car.

Yet, that night had created images I could draw on for a lifetime, Avery drenched and with ripped jeans, spread like my personal feast.

I could never forget this moment, either. How many times had I imagined fucking her on this very desk and now here she sat, willing to take every inch of me.

My movements became faster, her breathing uneven.

With a cry of pleasure that I muffled at the last second, she tightened around me, making me come at the same moment.

Fuck, orgasms had never felt so intense as with her. I leaned my forehead against hers, still overwhelmed by the feel of her body.

“Now go play the piano for me.”

I had been brooding all night about what Penelope Arden meant by her cryptic conversations. If it wasn't about Mr. Preston, then there must surely be another person she cared very much about. I also had my next suspect—Flavian, her brother, although I found it hard to imagine that a child, no matter how odd, could commit such an atrocity.

The service had just ended, and we made our way to the cafeteria. My stomach had been growling so loudly that probably everyone in the hall must have overheard it.

I flinched when someone put his heavy arm around my shoulder. Noah. He had apologized a thousand times, and each time I assured him I was fine. Of course, it didn't stop him from trying again. I could tell by the look on his face that something wasn't quite right, that there must have been more going on at his house than just a family emergency.

His dark circles under his eyes and sunken cheeks told me he was in a really bad place, and I didn't want to rush him into confiding in me.

“This is for you,” he said, pulling up a rose. It had been ages since I had been given flowers. With a big grin, I accepted it and kissed him on the cheek.

The barrier of friendship had strengthened between us, and I had realized that he did not mean these subtle gestures in a romantic way. His many crushes on other classmates were proof of that.

“That’s very sweet of you,” I assured him and kept walking, my head leaning against his shoulder.

The class was still half empty when we arrived; the room bathed in warm light. I massaged my temple and looked at my tablet. There were already heated discussions on our social platform about the upcoming party next week, and I couldn’t help but read through a few posts myself to see how the others would dress.

A debate had broken out under one girl’s post about why mustard yellow is the color of Satan, and I was eating my imaginary popcorn while following the comments.

As if on cue, the class fell silent—a sign that Mr. Preston had entered. I straightened up and glanced at my professor, who looked incredibly fine in his black slacks and white button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

He scanned the class, and he noted absences until his gaze lingered on me, or rather, on the heavenly-scented rose on my desk. His eyes darkened before he put on his mask of indifference.

“Weren’t you going to check the homework, sir?” a boy one row behind us asked, and Leilah turned to give him a sour look.

“Shut the fuck up. Nobody likes a rat,” Mr. Preston cut in, and the guy leaned back without another word.

“Someone’s in a bad mood,” Noah whispered to me, and I chuckled.

“Mr. Preston is probably just underfucked,” I replied loud enough for him to hear me. Oh God, how I loved annoying him.

“Ms. James?” His voice was the spitting image of pure calm, but I knew what was hiding behind it.

Maybe he would punish me in front of everyone and maybe, just maybe, I would like it more than I should. “Stand up.”

I followed his command. “Say that again.” *Shit*. When I remained quiet, he repeated himself, more threatening now, closing the distance between us and invading my personal space.

I cleared my throat, puzzled by his sudden proximity in front of others.

“It was just a joke,” I said sheepishly. “We want to hear the joke, too.” Chuckles erupted in the room.

I debated whether to just ignore him. Judging by the look on his face, it would be a mortal sin.

“I said you were underfucked, professor.” A smirk flashed over his perfectly curved lips.

“You seem to think a lot about my sex life.” I stared up at him, seeing the challenging look on his face.

“I think about a lot of things long and hard. Your dick isn’t one of them.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Caleb holding his fist in front of his mouth, barely able to control himself.

Mr. Preston pressed his index finger against my forehead and shoved me back down in my chair.

“I hope you’ll have just as big of a mouth on the oral exam. Sit down and be quiet before I have to punish you.” I wouldn’t be opposed to that at all. Of course, I had kept that comment to myself. The class had already overheard enough. The show was over.



WE HAD BEEN SITTING in complete silence for twenty minutes. Our professor had given us some questions that we were supposed to research on our own using our tablet database.

I had long since finished and was staring at the paper I had filled out. He paid no attention to us, sitting at his desk and scrolling on his tablet himself, looking more bored than ever.

I decided to send him a message, but he preempted me.

UNKNOWN:

Shouldn't you study, Avery?

I peered over at him, but he didn't look up.

AVERY JAMES:

I study, don't you see it?

UNKNOWN:

No, you give me these looks like you want me to fuck you right now in front of all the other students.

Images that were not supposed to emerge played out in front of my mind's eye. Me, bent over his desk, while he was working me from behind.

AVERY JAMES:

Maybe that's what I want.

Show them that you are mine while I go down on you.

He shifted in his fancy chair, discreetly reaching between his legs and placing his ankle on the other knee.

UNKNOWN:

Shut up or I'll fuck these bratty words out of your mouth.

AVERY JAMES:

Why are you rearranging yourself, professor?

UNKNOWN:

*Because I'm hard just thinking about the warmth of your
mouth.*

I pressed my legs together as the sweet warmth spread through
me.

AVERY JAMES:

Want a first-hand experience?

I pressed my lips together to suppress a grin.

UNKNOWN:

Careful, or I drag you out this class myself and teach you what that filthy mouth of yours gets you into.

AVERY JAMES:

Hunt me. 10 minutes.

I looked at him provocatively, my brow raised. It was the first time that Mr. Preston lifted his gaze. His eyes held a hunger I couldn't explain, a fire I'd never seen in him like this. It went beyond the carnal.

UNKNOWN:

Run.

ALEXANDER

I heard the little monster's heartbeat as she ran away, always down the hallway. It would be easy to find her, but something told me she wanted to be found.

Avery had made a big mistake - she had awakened my predatory instincts and this time she wouldn't get away so easily.

"Hey, nerd," I called out to the boy in the back. "You take over the class. Sit here until I get back. And don't mess around." His eyes lit up as he frantically walked over to my desk, and I almost rolled my eyes.

Without looking back, I took up the hunt for my wife. Even though our oath was no longer binding, she was still mine.

And would remain so forever.

I rushed in her direction, always following her sweet scent. Looking for her was the easiest thing in the world. Not only because of my heightened senses, but because our bodies practically attracted each other like magnets.

That's probably why she had ended up here. It was destiny. Almost every generation.

She had walked up and down floors, taking the quickest route to the west wing, where her room was. I shook my head. Avery was trying to lure me straight into her bed.

But there...she had changed her mind, went to the right. I made a sharp turn and let my senses take over. It didn't take

long for me to find the source of her scent—the far-too-small closet where we had met that night.

“That was quick,” she breathed after I closed the door behind me, killing the only source of light.

“You’re in big trouble, love,” I countered, the predator within me raging. If she had now seen my face, she would have noticed the black veins around my eyes, a reminder of the monster inside me.

“Is that so?” I heard the sarcasm in her voice and stepped closer until we were chest to chest. Avery wrapped her arms around me, her mouth inches from mine. “What’s my punishment, professor?”

I hated it when she called me that. It degraded everything we had been, the bond between us she didn’t even feel. And when the realization hit, her fate would be sealed. I blocked the images out of my mind.

She began kissing my throat, licking over my pulse, and I shuddered, already rock hard. Her hands scanned my body, stroking my chest and abdomen. The darkness intensified the feeling of her touch. “Detention? Or are you going to put me over your knee, slap me raw until I come under your touch?”

“Fuck, Avery...” I would have loved to take her right then and there, bury myself deep inside of her. But I still wanted to savor the moment.

“You seem eager to give these things a try.” I already knew she loved it, knew her better than I knew myself.

“Or I’ll serve you, grant you every wish while we’re here.” I ran my hand through her curly hair, as soft as the most exquisite cashmere.

“On your knees.” She paused briefly before obeying my request without protest.

One hand stroked my hard-on while the other gripped the back of my knee. I unbuttoned my pants and freed my dick from its confinement. It throbbed as soon as it felt her breath.

“Open your mouth.” Her lips parted and welcomed me, first tamely, then more greedily. I let out a low growl as she licked the tip for the first time.

My grip on her hair tightened as she pushed me deeper and deeper into her mouth. Holy souls...

Avery worked her hand in rhythm to the movements of her mouth, twisting her wrist and driving me crazy.

“Does it feel good?” Only a soft *mhm*, tortured by pleasure, passed my lips.

“Use your words.” Fuck, I almost burst at those words. A smile spread across my face.

“Yes, ma’am.” Apparently, she liked it when I called her that, because her movements became faster, greedier, as she massaged me with her tongue.

I could hardly stand it any longer, unable to hold back my release.

“Can I be rough?” I rasped.

“I insist.” That’s all she needed to say. I clawed into her hair so hard it had to hurt her, fucking her mouth until there was no more room left.

She took it all in, moaning as I filled her out. Her grip on my dick tightened, and with a low moan, I came deep down her throat.

Avery swallowed every drop like the obedient little monster she was. At least sometimes. 99 percent of the time she didn’t put up with my shit, which only made me love her even more.

She rose with shaky knees, and I took her chin between my fingers and kissed her, caressed her tongue with mine and tasted my seed.

I didn’t mind, quite the opposite.

“It’s already way too late. We have to go.” She slumped her shoulders but didn’t object. “You go ahead, I’ll catch up.”

Avery kissed my cheek. Just that little gesture made me shiver, made my heart melt. I hoped she would never remember me, us.

“Give me one more.”

ALEXANDER

A servant of the Arden family opened the door for me and invited me in. I had promised Penelope to visit her father to appease him regarding the murder. It was not my job, but our families were closely connected and had known each other for centuries.

No matter what had happened between me and Penelope in the past, I still felt sorry for her. Growing up in a family like hers was a fucking nightmare and if I could at least make her situation a little better, then I was happy with that.

“There you are,” I heard her voice from the grand double cherry wood staircase that led to one of the many floors of the mansion. She ran towards me in her supernatural speed and wrapped me in a tight embrace.

Hesitantly, I patted her back before pulling away.

“Your father?” I asked as I looked around the great hall.

The chandelier hung low from the ceiling, adorned with hundreds of crystals. The black marble beneath my shoes was polished enough for me to look at myself in the reflection, and the walls screamed of decadence, as they always did.

They lived like royalty, showing off their swank for all to see. Not that my parents didn't. In our circles, it was common to flaunt your wealth and power.

“He should be here any minute,” Penelope replied as she escorted me into the family's private dining room.

The table was set, blood already poured into self-cooling glasses. I took a seat next to her and made no effort to engage in a conversation.

A few moments later, her father arrived.

For others, he appeared no older than forty, a status of power, a sign that the magic in him was strong and kept him young.

He extended his hand to me, and I shook it, my grip tight.

“It’s kind of you to visit from time to time.” Although he seemed open, this sentence held a snarky undertone.

Nicholas Arden still hadn’t forgiven me for breaking off the engagement to his eldest daughter. The union would have brought our two families even closer together, but I could not commit myself for a lifetime—longer than some might imagine—to a woman who did not fascinate me in any way.

Well, I was fascinated by her stamina and that she never snapped, but that was basically it. I was also sure that Penelope didn’t love me. She put on this show to please her father, nothing more.

“A lot of work, you know.” He nodded and took a few sips of blood. At least it wasn’t alcohol. My kind could get very irritating if too much drinking was involved.

“Yeah, I hear you’ve got your hands full with work. Especially since this school year.” My gaze shot to the side, and I eyed the man with the square features.

“Criminals need a firm hand, and I’m giving it to them.”

No lie.

“Apparently, it’s not strong enough when you’ve got the rabid underclass running around and slaying others. Needless to say, there are already too many eyes on us, especially on Flavian.”

His son was soon to turn fifteen and would become more involved in family affairs. In their outdated hierarchy, he was still above his older daughter. That is, if Flavian wasn’t a sadistic asshole.

Penelope's fear was justified. If Nicholas learned his son was unpredictable and a danger to the family's reputation, he would certainly get rid of him and produce a new heir to the throne. Since pure, noble blood flowed through our veins, that would be the least of our problems.

Only impure sired couldn't produce offspring. Especially not with humans. So he had no reason to keep Flavian, and he didn't care about the boy either.

"We have everything under control," I assured him. "Evidence proves it was indeed some mortal. We will find the guilty person." He eyed me for a while, weighing whether or not to believe me. After a brief nod, it was clear that he had chosen the first option. *Idiot.*

We ate in silence and finished our drinks.

"Follow me for a cigar, boy." That was a request I couldn't refuse, so I kept pace with him and entered the smoking room. Despite his obnoxious nature, he respected me, or rather my family.

We had more influence, eyes and ears around the world.

"I was actually hoping you'd reconsidered the engagement after all." He lit a cigar, regarded me out of the corner of his eye.

I took out a pack of cigarettes and did the same.

"Then I'm sorry to disappoint you," I replied, inhaling the smoke. He rolled his eyes.

"We don't marry for love, kid, we marry out of duty. And your duty is to produce heirs. Knock her up a few times so you'll have a backup if some turn stupid. Then you can live your life the way you want. Take dozens of other women." I didn't let my confusion show.

This man seriously wanted to sell off his daughter so he could make a serious move into our family. Disgusting. "You can try her out for a night, if you want. I don't give a shit." Slowly, my jaw dropped.

I never cared much for Penelope, but for him to talk about her like that while she could hear us in the other room made my blood boil.

“To hear such disgusting words from an aristocratic mouth is more than disappointing. My family does well not to welcome such a disgrace to our species into the family.” Fortunately, my parents had realized at the last moment that an alliance with the Arden’s would do us more harm than good.

If they had insisted on the marriage though, I’d have had to obey, bound by their will.

Nicholas rose from the leather chair, and I did the same, ready to attack him at any moment. My parents would understand. No one had the right to harm their heir.

If he was intimidated, he did not show it.

“You dare speak to me like that in my own house?” he almost shouted. A wry smile spread across my lips.

“Anyone who insults a woman in my presence deserves more than dirty words.” I took a step closer, towering over him. “Never forget your last name and never forget mine. My family can crush you like a tiny insect. And if I hear you meddling in our family affairs one more time, my visit won’t be so friendly. Which little criminal killed the girl is entirely my business.”

An irritated expression flitted across his stern features. I took the last drag of the cigarette and ashed straight on his suit.

“Sorry.” I dropped the stub and stomped it on the antique carpet that must have cost a fortune. “Send me the bill.” Without another word, I turned and left.

Penelope met me in the foyer, where I took my jacket. She formed a soundless thank you and I nodded curtly before disappearing into the darkness.

My anger got the better of me. I needed fresh blood.

We were running late. The Halloween party had already started two hours ago, and we had just finished dressing up.

Well, you couldn't call the bit of fabric a costume, but it looked hot, and Alexander would surely like it too.

I was wearing a much too short silk dress that looked more like a provocative nightgown, the back completely bare. The straps were lined with little stones, sparkling like little stars on a cloudless night. I had decided to wear some high heels with straps that matched the ones on the dress.

Leilah was wearing almost the same outfit as me, except that her dress and shoes were a silvery white.

“Before we forget.” She handed me my mask that covered my eyes. Pointed horns were attached to it, making me look like the devil's slutty sister. Or at least like a distant cousin.

Giggling, we made our way to the hall where services were usually held. It was somehow poetic that the night of the dead was celebrated in a sacred place. Exactly my humor.

The loud bass could already be heard from the hallway, and my heart skipped a beat in anticipation. I had never been to a real Halloween party with friends.

At the bar, where only non-alcoholic drinks were served, we spotted the guys, both dressed as the Phantom of the Opera. Their costume was definitely much fancier than ours, we had to give them that.

Caleb gave Leilah a kiss on the cheek, which was more intimacy in public than I had ever seen from them before. Noah gestured for me to spin and let out a low whistle as he looked at my work of art.

We slipped into deep conversations about the worst conspiracy theories in human history and laughed until our bellies hurt. Even Caleb did, which was as rare as a flood in the Sahara.

“Come on guys, let’s dance. We’re not here for standing like prostitutes on the sidewalk,” Leilah urged, dragging us onto the dance floor.

“But we’re surely dressed like them”, I mumbled as I followed her.

One of my favorite songs played, and I lost myself in the music, soaking up the intense smell of myrrh and dusty bibles. I closed my eyes, thinking about everything and nothing. I was at an academy for juvenile criminals, dancing at a party with my friends. *Friends*. It was overwhelming.

Leilah took hundreds of photos, capturing every moment. I posed with the boys, both trying to show off their muscles. I, on the other hand, just had my arms wrapped around them and squeezed tight.

Then we took turns and Caleb had to take photos of me and Leilah, which of course took much longer.

“I think that’s enough,” I said, and she put her tablet back into her purse.

“It’s never enough,” she replied with an eye roll.

I was about to turn around when a touch, so feathery, tickled my bare spine. Irritated, I looked around, but couldn’t spot anyone familiar. Most of them had masks on anyway, covering part of their faces.

I let it go and turned my attention back to my friends when that strange feeling on my back reappeared. What the hell?

My eyes caught on a tall man, half of his face covered by a creepy black and red mask. His hair was neatly combed back,

and the outfit made him almost invisible in the crowd. I knew that proud posture, could recognize him just from his stance—Mr. Preston.

He made a head movement towards the exit, and I excused myself briefly to my friends.

Sweaty bodies were pressed tightly together, and I had to fight for my freedom. On my way, several elbows had made acquaintance with my ribs, and I gritted my teeth, trying to ignore the throbbing.

The first breath of fresh air was like jumping into a pool on a hot summer day. I hadn't known how much my body had needed this cool down.

The soft feeling on my skin appeared again, and I stumbled back a step, scared by the sudden touch.

I looked to my left, where the man dressed all in black was slowly making his way towards the woods.

A tingling sensation spread through my lower belly, for I knew what would be waiting for me under the cover of the trees.

I pressed my coat, which I had fetched from the rack shortly before I stepped out, closer to me, but the icy air still found ways to make me shiver.

I almost fell a few times, since high heels and uneven ground were not a good combination.

Finally, my fingers touched the first tree trunk, but I couldn't see my professor anywhere. Had he lured me here just for fun or was he just trying to scare me?

“I swear to you, if you jump off a tree or something, I'll castrate you,” I shouted, but nothing came back, not a single sound.

The once deafening music had faded into the distance while the silent woods watched my every step.

With an annoyed groan, I turned around and was about to make my exit when someone yanked me back hard and

pressed me against a tree. A scream of terror escaped my far too dry throat.

I had no time to think, already feeling soft lips on mine. Only when I inhaled deeper, noticing the seductive smell that haunted me even in my dreams, did my body relax.

Alexander's greedy fingers wandered over my chest to my throat.

"You scared me," I murmured between our heated kisses, and I felt his smile.

"Did it turn you on?" His mouth moved to my jaw, then to my collarbone.

"See for yourself," was my only response. Without warning, his fingers slipped under my thong, and I let out a whimper. So fucking cold.

"There's room for more." Alexander freed one of my breasts, biting on my nipple and making me moan. God, they were literally screaming for his tongue, his teeth.

While his fingers made cruelly slow circles around the most sensitive spot between my legs, his kisses left little flames of desire on my breasts. If it hadn't been so cold, I would have ripped his clothes off long ago.

Alexander's body deprived me of its warmth as he went down on his knees and placed one of my thighs on his shoulder so that I was sprawled out in front of him, unable to move.

"You don't know how long I've been waiting for this, Avie."

He moved the piece of lace aside and then I felt the sudden heat of his tongue as it greedily explored every inch.

My eyes fell back, and I let out a low moan, unable to contain myself as he did his magic between my legs.

Alexander spread them wider, and I shuddered as I felt his tongue deep inside me. It felt so much different from his length, yet equally hot. Fuck, he smiled at me like a starved man.

“You’re so beautiful, you’re my salvation,” he murmured, barely audible. *And I think I’m falling in love with you.*



Alexander

SHE TASTED of sin and the sweetest seduction, my eternity. I increased the pressure of my tongue, my movements faster as she clung to my hair, pulling on it.

I slid a finger inside her, and she pressed herself harder against my mouth.

Avery made a deep, throaty sound that pierced my marrow, her unique scent clouding my senses.

How I would have loved to bury my fangs in her skin, to taste her just once. It would be enough for a lifetime. No, that was a lie. I would never get enough of her blood.

Avery’s thigh was pressed against my cheek. All I had to do was turn my head and mark her as mine. But what if I couldn’t stop? What if her blood was that intoxicating?

You can stop, I assured myself. Just one taste. The diabolical voice in my head that knew no mercy, no remorse, gained the upper hand, and I turned my head, fixing her thigh with my hand and biting her as my other fingers moved firmly in and out of her.

A gasp of surprise escaped her lips, but she had no time to panic as one small drop of my venom sent her into complete ecstasy. It was a feeling of pure high, giving you the best orgasm of your life.

Her blood touched my tongue, and I almost came on the spot. It tasted more intense than anything I had ever drank in my life. Her elixir of life, made just for me, my personal drug.

I sucked hard and her blood ran down my throat, burning itself into my memory like the moment I had seen her for the first time and then for the second, third and a few weeks ago for the fourth time. In each of her lives I had found her, or she

had found me, doomed to fall in love again and yet not be together.

A cry escaped her lips as her muscles tightened around my fingers and her wetness trickled down my wrist.

Enough, screamed the other, more rational voice in my head. *Enough...*

I withdrew my fangs and saw the two puncture marks on her pale skin. They would heal in a few minutes, just as the wound on her palm had healed.

I startled when another scream left her throat, this time not out of pleasure, but out of terror.



Avery

I PUSHED HIM BACK, the corners of his mouth and chin stained dark red. Had he fucking bitten me? No...

I backed away from him, as the macabre realization set in. My shoes got stuck in the mud and I stepped out of them to put more distance between us.

My dreams, the black eyes, Leilah's fear of blood. If the cold hadn't stiffened my limbs, I might have fainted.

He slowly rose to his feet, making no sudden movements as if I were pointing a gun at him. My heart was pounding wildly, set to burst from my chest, and my fingers twitched uncontrollably.

"Don't be afraid of me," he begged as he extended his hand, but I backed away. His eyes, once as bright as the sky, had turned dark blue.

Sometimes the monsters are closer to you than you think. He had once told me that.

I couldn't believe it, didn't want to believe it, and yet my heart had always known, as if he had confessed it to me long ago.

With an aching heart, I turned around and sprinted off. Stones and small branches bored into my bare feet, but I hardly felt the pain. The adrenaline numbed my senses.

I moved farther and farther away from the academy, the woods denser and darker. I wanted to take a turn to get onto the main road when there was a rustling not far away from me. He had caught up with me. Or no, he hadn't.

A white shirt flashed in the corner of my eye, but I had no time to think about it, wanted to bring a hemisphere between us.

Alexander had lied to me, had bitten me. Maybe he would have done worse...

My lungs threatened to give up, my movements slowed. Only my wildly pounding heart forced me to keep running, away from the *vampire*.



Alexander

I RAN AFTER HER, but left enough distance between us, not wanting to scare her even more. At some point, she would tire out.

My girl was completely terrified, and it broke my heart. I cursed myself for the pain I had caused her and wouldn't be able to live, knowing she hated me.

The smell of blood on her feet grew stronger, and I had to summon all my strength to suppress the black veins around my eyes. That would finish her completely.

From the distance I heard the cracking of branches, saw someone running towards us. Flavian. I increased my pace, wanting to shield her from him. The sadistic asshole loved to terrorize the mortal students.

"Sharing is caring," he said from far away, knowing I could hear him.

He stepped up a notch so Avery could see him. Another scream escaped her lips and before Flavian could grab her, I shoved him away with my supernatural strength. He crashed into a tree that broke in two from the impact. Penelope's brother just laughed like a moron, as if this was all a joke to him.

"Not nice," he quipped before picking up his chase.

Avery's blood, her fear, and the fact that she was running away from him made her the ultimate prey that fueled his instincts.

I didn't have time to catch myself, and he kept speeding up as Avery ran away from us in a zigzag. Flavian turned his wrist in my direction and sent a gust of wind right into my center, letting me fly back as if I weighed nothing.

Damn, I had underestimated the little bastard, especially his elemental magic, which a few strong vampires had.

A lasso of fire came out of my fingers, wanting to burn his arms, but he dodged at the last second, close on Avery's heels.

I saw her struggling for every step and feared she could take it no more. With a single thought, I sent wind to her back, so that she gained speed, but I knew it was in vain.

My feet barely touched the ground, as I grabbed the boy by the shirt before vines wrapped around my legs and pulled me to the ground. I burned the vines and got to my feet when I heard Avery scream. My blood froze.

Flavian stood behind her, had his hand wrapped around her throat, fingers digging into her fragile skin. Her eyes were red, while his were black as night.

"One more step and I'll kill her, *professor*."

ALEXANDER

Is this what an out-of-body experience felt like?

I couldn't think clearly, only saw Avery's tortured face in front of me. She was violently scratching his forearms, kicking and twisting, but it was as if she was fighting a wall. Flavian's eyes were full of murderous rage, thirsty for her blood.

"I already knew something was wrong when I smelled you on her but you fucking your students is new to me," he said with amusement. A growl came over my lips. "Or is there more?"

I had tried with all my might to hide my feelings for her, to protect her from the monsters that lurked in this academy. Apparently I had failed, if even this sadist had noticed my love for her.

"I don't give a shit about her," I said, praying she wouldn't believe me. A mix of anger and disappointment lit up in her eyes and I hated myself for the words I had to speak next. "She was only good for a fuck. Her blood was a bonus, even though I'd tasted better."

Flavian snorted, and I saw tears gathering in Avery's eyes. No matter how much I would have wanted to, I couldn't take off the mask of cold indifference.

"Did you hear that? Our professor just took advantage of you." He brushed a curl out of her face, and I almost sprinted to him to break his fingers.

“Let her go and we’ll settle this like men.” He grinned, and demonstratively grabbed her harder.

It took only a fraction of his strength to kill her. I couldn’t watch it happen again, had to watch her die too many times already.

The first time was when my parents found out that I had secretly married her. They had tortured Avery and when I finally found her, her injuries were too severe. She died in my arms.

Had I not been bound by my parents’ will, I would have slaughtered my entire lineage. They were the first ones who had taken away my little spark of hope.

In her second life, she already had been married and had children when I had found her, more beautiful than ever.

We had only talked, and she had told me about her journeys and adventures with her husband. A picture perfect life...without me. Each of her smiles broke something new in me and healed something old.

She couldn’t remember our past. But why would she? Only I was doomed to long for her every minute of my life.

Afraid my parents would find her in this life too, I left her behind, let her continue her normal life.

But one day my heart could no longer bear the separation and I had visited her. Her children and husband had died of the pox not long after I had left her.

And when I returned, she was taking her last breaths—tuberculosis. I wanted to heal her, but it was too late. She had died in my arms.

It was almost as if her soul had been waiting, knowing that I would come to see her one last time.

In her supposed third life I had traveled half the world but hadn’t found her. I had even searched for her in nunneries—to no avail. As if my Avery would voluntarily become a nun. I had waited, maybe she would find me instead, but I wasn’t so lucky.

A lifetime later, I had met her at one of her concerts. She was a musician, had played the piano like a goddess. If I had not already loved her, I would have fallen in love with her all over again.

I went to every one of her concerts, never missed a single one, was always the one who clapped first and loudest. That was my girl, talented and beautiful as she is now.

For months I didn't dare to approach her, for fear my parents would find out, but one night, on our wedding day, we started talking and I accompanied her home.

Then it became a habit. For years I carried her bag while we walked along the dark alleys, until it started to show that I was not aging, so I had to leave her behind.

Yet she had never stopped waiting for me every night before she went off on her own.

There were times when I had watched from afar to make sure she got home safely. At least I had used that as an excuse to admire her, veiled in the shadows.

Avery had never married, never had children. I was the only person who mourned at her deathbed, and in her last breaths she remembered me, our time together. That had broken my heart.

In the fifth life she had found me, here of all places where danger was omnipresent.

I almost fell to my knees when I saw her again in my class a few weeks ago, her face the same as in every life.

My heart burned for her. She wasn't supposed to be here, and I wanted her out, even if it destroyed me.

But I had failed miserably, had allowed myself to feel a glimpse of happiness, and now here we were in this damn wood, a psychopath's hand around her throat.

"Hunting you was more fun than Olivia," he whispered into her ear, and she trembled, seeing death before her eyes.

"Let her go, or I'll skin you alive," I said calmly. Only the veins of rage around my eyes showed him I was serious.

“We can share like brothers.” Penelope’s brother gave me a challenging look, wanting to test me.

“I don’t want her.” A silent plea stuck to Avery’s quivering lips, and my mind went blank.

He was about to bury his fangs into her when I sprinted towards him with a battle cry, faster than I’ve ever been. The bastard raised his eyes and smiled.

Then he broke her neck.

Avery's heart had stopped, I had heard its last beat.

She sank lifelessly to the ground, Flavian had already disappeared. No... My heart that beat only for her froze, and I was no longer aware of my surroundings.

Suddenly, the ground beneath me trembled from my dark, raging magic. A gust of wind destroyed trees and my fire burned the earth.

I fell to the ground beside her, and my fingers touched her ice-cold skin.

“Please don't leave me,” I screamed as I violently shook her shoulders, hoping she would wake up. “I need you, please, we didn't have time.” Bitter tears ran down my cheeks.

All five lifetimes, we hadn't had a chance to love each other and now I had to say goodbye once again.

She had to listen to all those nasty comments, had to believe them.

The last words she heard out of my mouth were that I didn't want her. On my soul, I did, I wanted her so badly. In all these years, I could never tell her what I really felt, could never lay my heart at her feet.

“I love you so much, in this life, all the past and all the future ones. We will find each other again, *I* will find you again.”

I spent an eternity next to her body, rocking her back and forth and crying into her hair.

Until her fingers twitched.

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